

THE MAN WHO WAS GOOD

xx Leonard Merrick xx

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The Works of Leonard Merrick

THE MAN WHO WAS GOOD

The Works of
LEONARD MERRICK

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an Introduction by SIR J. M. BARRIE.

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With an Introduction by SIR WILLIAM ROBERT-
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tion by G. K. CHESTERTON.

WHILE PARIS LAUGHED: BEING PRANKS AND
PASSIONS OF THE POET TRICOTRIN.

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

THE MAN WHO WAS GOOD

By LEONARD MERRICK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
J. K. PROTHERO



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INTRODUCTION

THERE is a rare refreshment in the works of Leonard Merrick; gracious yet distinctive, his style has a polished leisure seldom enjoyed these days when perfection of literary form is at a discount. His art is impossible of label; almost alone amongst the writers of to-day he has the insight and the courage at once to admit the pitiless facts of life and to affirm despite them—through hunger and loneliness, injustice and disappointment—the spirit can and does remain unbroken; that if there be no assurance of success, neither is there certainty of failure.

There is no sentimental weakness in the method he employs. A rare genius for humour tempers all his work; he can record the progressive starvation of an actor out of work in an economy of phrase that leaves no room for gratuitous appeal, trace the long-drawn efforts to outpace persistent poverty of pence with a simplicity that enforces conviction. His pen is never so poignant or restrained as when he shows us a woman sharpened and coarsened by cheap toil.

But throughout the tale of struggle and triumph, defeat and attainment, there persists that sense of eternal quest which shortens the hardest road. Do you starve to-day? Opportunity of plenty may wait at the street corner, the chance of a lifetime alight from the next 'bus; for Leonard Merrick is not concerned with people of large incomes and small problems; the men and women of whom he writes earn their own living.

His most marked successes deal with stage life, indeed he is one of the very few authors who convince one of the actuality of theatrical folk. He shows us the chorus girl in her lodgings, in the Strand bars, at the dramatic agency; we understand her ambitions, become familiar with her unconquerable pluck and capacity for comradeship, even acquire a liking for the smell of grease-paint. We meet the same girl out of an engagement, follow her pilgrimage from Bloomsbury to Brixton seeking an ever cheaper lodging; we watch the mud and wet of the streets soak her inadequate boots, endure with her the pangs of hunger ill allayed by a fugitive bun. We accompany her to the pawnbroker's, and experience the joys of combat with a recalcitrant "uncle" who refuses to lend more than eighteen-pence on a silk blouse. And still the sense of adventure persists, the reality of romance en-

dures, the joy of laughter remains. We realise the compensation of precarious tenure on sufficiency, appreciate the great truth that the adversity of to-day is lightened by the uncertainty of to-morrow, that no matter how grim the struggle, how sharp the hardship—and the hunger—the sense of adventure companions and consoles. Authors who concern themselves only with men and women of assured position and regular incomes have forgotten the truth which Leonard Merrick so triumphantly affirms. Romance is no respecter of persons. The freedom of the open road, its promise, its pitfalls, sudden ecstasies and fugitive glammers is not a preserve of the rich but the heritage of the people.

His psychological methods allure one by their seeming simplicity; quietly, with a delicate deliberation, he emphasises the outline of his characters until with sudden swift decision, in the utterance of a phrase, the doing of some one of those small things that are life's real revelations, he shows you the soul of the man or woman whose externals he has so carefully portrayed. Half-forgotten words and acts crowd in on the memory, as in *The Man who was Good* when Carew appeals to Mary to save his child—and her rival's. It needed the genius of Merrick to make one realise that the high-water mark of betrayal

was reached not by the man's desertion of the woman who loved him, but by his pitiful exploitation of that love.

I know of no author with a more subtle understanding of woman, her generosity and meanness, her strange reticence, amazing candours. Mary Brettan, that tragedy of invincible fidelity, could only have been portrayed by a man able to sense feminine capacity for dumb fortitude. One feels that had she made even a gesture of revolt, Mary would have been freed of the paralysis of sterile constancy; and one knows that women of her type can never make the ultimate defiance.

Leonard Merrick has the inimitable gift of inducing his readers to experience the emotions he portrays. The zest of adventure grips you, as it grips the hero of *Conrad in Quest of His Youth*, perhaps the greatest of his triumphs. We share with that perfect lover his mellow regrets and his anticipatory ardours; we wait in tremulous expectancy outside the little restaurant in Soho for his delightful Lady Darlington, falling with him from light-hearted confidence to sickening uncertainty as time wears on and still she does not come. The same emotional buoyancy stirs in all his work; his incomparable humour endears to us the least of

his creations. His adorable landladies become our friends, his "walking gentlemen" our close acquaintance. I do not know to this day whether I have met certain of these heavenly creatures in life or in Mr. Merrick's novels, and it is difficult to enter a theatrical lodging without feeling that you are living the last story in *The Man Who Understood Women*, or revisiting the first beginnings of Peggy Harper.

London has many lovers, none so intimate with her allurements as Leonard Merrick. He knows the glamour of her midnight pavements, the hunger of her clamant streets, and the enchantments of her grey river have drawn him. He has felt the deciduous charm of her luxury, the abiding pleasure of her leafy spaces, and the intriguing alleys of Fleet Street are to him familiar and dear. For the suburbs he has an infinite kindness, and has companioned adventure on many a questing tram.

It has long been a matter of insuperable difficulty to obtain Mr. Merrick's novels; for years I have essayed to find a copy of *Conrad*, and from every bookseller have been sent empty away. In a moment of folly I lent my own copy to a neighbour—I cannot call him friend—who forthwith adopted the volume as his most invaluable possession, and, undeterred by savagery

or threats, refused to give it up. And now after long waiting, I am made glad by a re-issue of these incomparable works, and the knowledge that an ever-increasing public, too long denied the opportunity of their acquaintance, will share my delight. Far removed from the nightmare of the problem novel, his books centre on simple human things savoured with the rare salt of his humour; and whether in the suburbs or the slums, in Soho or the Strand, whether prosperous or starving, the men and women of whom he writes are touched with that high courage, that fine comradeship, which is the very essence of romance.

J. K. PROTHERO.

THE MAN WHO WAS GOOD

“That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;
Such is life’s trial, as old earth smiles and knows.
If you loved only what were worth your love,
Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you.”

James Lee’s Wife.

THE MAN WHO WAS GOOD

CHAPTER I

THERE were three women in the dressing-room. Little Miss Macy, who played a subaltern, was pulling off her uniform; and the "Duchess," divested of velvet, stood brushing the powder out of her hair. The third woman was doing nothing. In a chair by the theatrical hamper labelled "Miss Olive Westland's Tour: 'The Foibles of Fashion' Co.," she sat regarding the others, her hands idle in her lap. She was scarcely what is called "beautiful," much less was she what ought to be called "pretty"; perhaps "womanly" came nearer to suggesting her than either. Her eyes were not large, but they were so pensive; her mouth was not small, but it curved so tenderly; the face was not regular, but it looked so deliciously soft. Somebody had once said that it "made him admire God"; in watch-

ing her, it seemed such a perfect thing that there should be a low white brow, and hair to shade it; it seemed such an exquisite and consummate thing that there should be lips where the Maker put lips, and a chin where the chin is modelled. Her age might have been twenty-seven, also it might have been thirty. The wise man does not question the nice woman's age—he just thanks Heaven she lives; and she in the chair by the hamper was decidedly nice. Other women said so.

“Have you been in front, Mrs. Carew?” asked the “Duchess.”

She answered that she had. “I came round at the end. It was a very good house; the business is improving.”

“I should think,” remarked the “subaltern,” reaching for her skirt, “you must know every line of the piece, the times you’ve seen it! But, of course, you’ve nothing else to do.”

“No, it isn’t lively sitting alone all the evening in lodgings; and it’s more comfortable in the circle than behind. How you people manage to get dressed in some of the theatres puzzles me; I look at you from the front, remembering where your things were put on, and marvel. If I were in the profession, my salary wouldn’t keep me in the frocks I ruined.”

"I wonder Carew has never wanted you to go into it."

The nice woman laughed.

"Go into the profession!" she exclaimed—"I? Good gracious, what an idea! No; Tony has a very flattering opinion of his wife's abilities, but I don't think even he goes the length of fancying I could act."

"You'd be as good as a certain leading lady we know of, at any rate. Nobody could be much worse than our respected manageress, I'll take my oath!"

"Jeannie," said the "Duchess" sharply, "don't quarrel with your bread-and-butter!"

"I'm not," said the girl; "I'm criticising it—a very different matter, my dear. I hate these amateurs with money, even if they do take out companies and give shops to us pros. She queers the best line I've got in the piece every night because she won't speak up and nobody knows what it's an answer to. The real type of the 'confidential actress' is Miss Westland; no danger of *her* allowing anyone in the audience to overhear what she says!"

"Tony believes she'll get on all right," said Mrs. Carew, "when she has had more experience. You do, too, don't you, Mrs. Bowman?"

The "Duchess" replied vaguely that "experi-

ence did a great deal." She had profited by her own, and at the "aristocratic mother" period of her career no longer canvassed in dressing-rooms the capabilities of the powers that paid the treasury.

"Get on?" echoed Jeannie Macy, struggling into her jacket, "of course she'll get on; she has oof! If it's very much she's got, you'll see her by-and-by with a theatre of her own in London. Money, influence, or talent, you must have one of the three in the profession, and for a short-cut give me either of the first two. Sweet dreams, both of you; I've got a hot supper waiting for me, and I can smell it spoiling from here!" The door banged behind her; and Mrs. Carew turned to the "Duchess" with a smile.

"You're coming round to us afterwards, aren't you?" she said.

"Yes, Carew asked the husband in the morning: I hope he's got some coppers; I reminded him. It's such a bother having to keep an account of how we stand after every deal. We'll be round about half-past twelve. Are you going?"

"I should think Tony ought to be ready by now. You remember our number?"

"Nine?"

"Nine; opposite the baker's."

Mrs. Carew hummed a little tune, and made her way down the stairs. The stage, of which she had a passing view, was dark, for the foot-lights were out, and in the T-piece only one gas-jet flared bluely between the bare expanse of boards and the blackness of the empty auditorium. In the passage, a man, hastening from the star-room, almost ran against her; Mr. Seaton Carew still wore the clothes in which he finished the play, and he had not removed his make-up yet.

"What!" she cried, "haven't you changed? How's that? What have you been doing?"

"I've been talking to Miss Westland," he explained hurriedly. "There was something she wanted to see me about. Don't wait any longer, Mary; I've got to go up to her lodgings with her."

She hesitated a moment, surprised.

"Is it so important?" she asked.

"Yes," he said; "I'll tell you about it later on; I want to have a talk with you afterwards. I shan't be long."

Whenever she came to the theatre, which was four or five times a week, they, naturally, returned together, and she enjoyed the stroll in the fresh air, "after the show," with Tony. Three years' familiarity with the custom had

not destroyed its charm to her. To-night she went out into the Leicester streets a shade disconsolately. The gas was already lighted when she reached the house, and a fire—for the month was March—burnt clearly in the grate. The accommodation was not extensive: a small ground-floor parlour, and a bedroom at the back. On the parlour mantelpiece were some faded photographs of people who had stayed there—Mr. Delancey as the Silver King; Miss Ida Ryan, smoking a cigarette, as Sam Willoughby. She took off her coat, and, turning her back on the supper-table, wondered what the conference with Miss Westland was about.

The tedium of the delay began to tell upon her. The landlady had brought in her book of testimonials during the afternoon, to ask Mr. and Mrs. Carew for theirs; and fetching it from where it lay, she began listlessly to turn the leaves. These books were abominated by Carew, for he never knew what to write; and, perusing the comments in this one, she mentally agreed with him that it was not easy to find a medium between curtness and exaggeration. Some she recognised, knowing before she looked what signatures were appended. The "Stay but a little, I will come again" quotation she had seen above the same name in a score of lodgings, and

there were two or three "impromptus" in rhyme that she had met before.

She had been very happy this time at Leicester. They had arrived on the anniversary of her and Tony's first meeting, and she had felt additionally tender towards him all the week. The landlady had not effected the happiness certainly, but her lodger was quite willing to give her some of the benefit of it. She dipped the pen in the ink, and wrote in a bold, upright hand, "The week spent in Mrs. Liddy's apartments will always be a pleasant remembrance to Mr. and Mrs. Seaton Carew." Then she put the date underneath.

She had just finished when Mrs. Liddy entered with the beer. The Irishwoman said that she was going to bed, but that Mrs. Carew would find more glasses in the cupboard when her friends came. She supposed that that was all?

It was now twelve o'clock, and Mrs. Carew, with an occasional glance at the cold beef and the corner of rice pudding, began to walk about the room. Presently she stopped and listened. A whistle had reached her from outside—the whistle of eight notes that is the actor's call. She surmised that young Dolliver had forgotten their number, as he did in every town. She

drew aside the blind and let the light shine out. Young Dolliver it was.

"I've been whistling all up and down the road," he said, aggrieved; "what were you doing?"

"Well, that isn't bad," she laughed. "Why don't you remember addresses like anybody else?"

"Can't," he declared; "never could! Never know where I'm staying myself if I don't make a note of it as soon as I go in. In Jarrow, one Monday, I had to wander all over the place for three mortal hours in the pouring rain, looking for someone in the company to tell me where I lived. Hallo! where's Carew?"

"He'll be in directly," she said. "Sit down."

"Oh! I'm awfully sorry to have come so early," he exclaimed; "why, you haven't fed or anything."

He was a bright-faced boy, with a cheery flow of chatter, and she was glad he had appeared.

"I expect the Bowmans any minute," she assured him; "you aren't early. Do sit down, there's a good child, and don't stand fiddling your hat about; put it on the piano! Have you banqueted yourself?"

"To repletion. What did you think of Carew's notice in the Great Sixpennyworth on

Saturday? Wasn't it swagger? 'The rôle finds an ideal exponent in Mr. Seaton Carew, an actor who is rapidly making his way into the foremost ranks of his profession!'

"A line and a half," she said, "by a provincial correspondent! I shan't be satisfied till—well!"

"I know—till you see him with sixteen lines all to himself in the *Telegraph*! No more will he, I fancy. He's red-hot on success, is Carew—do anything for it. So'm I; I should like to play Claude."

"Claude?" she exclaimed. "Why, you're funny!"

"Not by disposition," he declared. "Miss Westland is responsible for my being funny. When they said 'a small comedy-part is still vacant,' I said small comedy-parts are my forte of fortes! Had it been an 'old man' that was wanted, I should have professed myself born to dodder. But if it comes to choice—to the secret tendency of the sacred fire—I am lead, I am romantic, I have centre-entrances in the lime-light. Look here: 'A deep vale, shut out by Alpine——' No, wait a minute; you do the Langtry business and let the flowers fall, while I 'paint the home.' Do you know, my private opinion is that Claude only took those lessons so

that the widow shouldn't be put to any expense doing up the home. Haven't got any flowers? Anything else then—where are the cards?"

He found the pack on the sideboard, and pushed a few into her hand.

"These'll do for the flowers," he said; "finger 'em lovingly; think you're holding a good nap."

"Don't be so ridiculous!"

"I'm not," said Dolliver, with dignity; "I really want to hear your views on my reading. Where was I—er—er—

"Near a clear lake margin'd by fruits of gold
And whispering myrtles; glassing softest skies
As cloudless, save with rare and roseate shadows . . .
As I would have thy fate.'

You see I make a pause after 'shadows'—I'm natural. I gaze hesitatingly at the floats, and the borders, and a kid in the pit. Then I meet the eyes of the fair Pauline, and conclude with 'As I would have thy fate,' smiling dreamily at the excellence of the comparison. That's a new point, I take it?"

He was seriously enamoured of his "new point," and was still expatiating on it when they heard Carew unlocking the street-door.

It was a man much of the woman's own age who came in. His face was clean-shaven, and his hair was worn a trifle longer than the hair

of most men. Now that he was seen in a good light, it was plain that he was disturbed; but he shook Dolliver by the hand as if relieved to find him there.

"What, not had supper? You must be starving, Mary?"

"I *am* pretty hungry," she admitted; "aren't you?"

"Well, I've had something—still, I'll come to the table." She had looked disappointed, and he drew his chair up. "Dolliver?"

"Nothing for me, thanks. Oh! a glass of beer—I don't object to that."

Despite her assertion, Mary made no great progress with her supper, and Carew's evident disquietude even damped the garrulity of the boy. It was not until the Bowmans arrived and a game of napoleon had been begun, that the faint restraint caused by his manner wore away.

Mr. Bowman, mindful of his wife's injunction, had provided himself with several shillings'-worth of coppers, and, profiting by his forethought, each of the party started with a rouleau of pence. These occasional card parties after the performance had become an institution in "The Foibles of Fashion" company, and it was seldom that anyone found them expensive. Mary's

capital, coppers included, was half a sovereign, and to have won or lost such a sum as that at a sitting would have been the subject of allusion for a month. To-night, however, the luck was curiously unequal, and, to the surprise of all, Dolliver found himself losing seven shillings before he had been playing half an hour. Much sympathy was expressed for Dolliver.

"Never mind, dear boy; it's always a mistake to win early in the evening," said Carew. "There's plenty of time. I pass!"

"Pass," said the "Duchess."

Mary called three, and made them.

"How do you stand, Mrs. Carew?" asked Bowman.

"I'm just about the same as when we began. Tony, Mr. Bowman has nothing to drink.—Oh, what a shame, Dolliver!—thanks! Fill up your own, won't you?—He's a perfect martyr, this boy," she went on; "he cleared the table before you two people came in—didn't you?"

"Four!" cried Dolliver. "Yes; I cleared it beautifully. Utility is my line of business."

"Since when? I thought just now——"

"Oh, confidences, Mrs. Carew!" He turned scarlet. "Don't give me away! . . . Now, Mrs. Bowman, which is it to be?"

She played trumps, and led with a king.

A breathless moment, crowned by an unsuspected "little one" from Dolliver. His "four" were safe, and he leant back radiant.

The "Duchess" prepared to deal.

"Who's got an address for the next town?" she inquired.

"Haven't you written yet?"

"No, we haven't got a place to write to; hateful, isn't it? If there's a thing I loathe, it's having to look for rooms after we get in. We've—pass!—always stayed in the same house, and—everybody to put in the kitty again!—and now the woman's left, or something. My! isn't the kitty getting big—look at all those sixpences underneath. Somebody count it!"

"Now then, Carew, don't go to sleep!"

Carew, thus adjured, gathered up the cards. Fitfully he was almost himself again, and only Mary was really sure that anything was amiss.

"There's a little hotel I've stopped at there," he said. "Not at all bad—they find you everything for twenty-five bob the week; for two people there'd be a reduction, too. Remind me, and I'll give you the name; I have it in my book. Bowman, you to call!"

Bowman called nothing; everybody passed

again, and the kitty was augmented once more.

"What time do we travel Sunday—anybody know?"

"You can be precious sure," said Bowman, "that it will be at some unearthly hour. I've had a good many years' experience in the profession, but I never in my life was in a company where they did so many night journeys as they do in this one. I believe that little outsider arranges it on purpose!"

"A daisy of an acting-manager, isn't he? I once knew another fellow much the—two, I call two—and then, at the end of the tour, hanged if they didn't rush us for a presentation to him!"

"So they will for this chap. Presentations in the profession, upon my soul, are the——"

"Three," said the "Duchess."

"And when the time comes, not a member of the crowd will have the pluck to refuse. You see!"

"Did you ever know an actor who had, when he was asked?"

Dolliver flushed excitedly.

"Nap!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, oh, oh! Dolliver goes nap!"

"No; d'ye mean it? Very well, fire ahead, then; play up!"

There was two minutes' silence, and the

youngster smacked down his last card, preparing a smile for defeat.

"He's made it! Mrs. Bowman, you threw it away; if you'd played hearts, instead——"

"No, no, she couldn't help it. She had to follow suit."

"Of course!"—the "Duchess" caught feebly at the explanation—"I had to follow suit. What a haul! good gracious!"

"That puts you right again, eh, dear boy?"

"'I am once more the great house of Lyons!'" remarked Dolliver, piling up the pennies. "Six, seven, eight! Look at the silver, great Scott! Mrs. Carew, there's the ninepence I owe you."

"'I have paid this woman, and I owe her nothing,'" quoted Carew. "Dolliver, you've ruined me, you beggar! Where's the 'bacca?"

At something to three there was a murmur about its being late, but the loser now was Mrs. Bowman, and as her shillings had drifted into the possession of Mary, the hostess said it really was not late at all. This disposed of the breaking-up question for half an hour. Then Bowman began to talk of concluding the game after a couple of rounds. When two such arrangements had been made and set at naught, the "Duchess" proposed that they should finish at the next "nap." To "finish at the next nap" was a

euphemism for continuing for a good long while, and the resolution was carried unanimously.

The clock had struck four when the nap was made, and the winner was Mary. She had won more than six shillings, and the "Duchess," who was the poorer by the amount, smiled with sleepy resignation.

"You had the luck after all, Mrs. Carew," laughed Dolliver. "Good-night."

"Yes," she said carelessly; "I've made something between me and the workhouse, anyhow! Good-night."

She loitered about the room, putting little aimless touches to things, while Carew saw the trio to the door. She heard him shut it behind them, and heard their steps growing fainter on the pavement. He was slow returning, queerly slow. Dolliver's voice reached her, taking leave of the Bowmans at the corner, and still he had not come in.

"Tony!" she called.

He rejoined her almost as she spoke.

"Don't go to bed, Mary," he said huskily; "I've something to say to you."

"What is it?" she asked.

He hesitated for an instant, seeking an introductory phrase. The agitation that he had been fighting all the night had conquered him.

"My release has come at last," he answered.
"My wife is dead."

"Dead?"

She stood gazing at him with dilated eyes, the colour ebbing from her cheeks.

"She was ill some time. Drink it was, I hear; I daresay! Anyhow, she's gone; the mistake is finished. I've paid for it dearly enough, Lord knows!"

He had paused midway between her and the hearth, and he moved to the hearth. She was sensible of a vague pang as he did so. A tense silence followed his words. In thoughts that she had been unable to escape, the woman who had paid for his mistake more dearly still had sometimes imagined such a moment as this—had sometimes foreseen him crying to her that he was free. Perhaps, now that the moment was here, it was a little wanting—a little barer than the announcement of freedom that she had pictured.

"You're bound to feel the shock of it," she said, almost inaudibly. "It's always a shock, the news of death." But she felt that the burden of speech should be his. "Were you—used you to be very fond of her? Does it come back?"

"I was twenty. 'Fond'? I don't know. I wasn't with her three months when—— She had walked Liverpool; I never saw her from the day

I found it out. She didn't want me; the money was enough for her—to be sure of it every week!"

His attitude remained unchanged, his hands thrust deep into his trouser-pockets. Opposite each other, both reviewed the past. She waited for him to come to her—to touch her. Yes, the reality was barer than the picture that she had seen.

"When was it?" she murmured.

"It was some weeks ago."

"So long?"

He left the hearth moodily, and began to pace the room from end to end. The woman did not stir. The memory was with her of the morning that he had avowed this marriage—of the agony that had wept to her for pity—of the clasp that would not let her go. She looked abstractedly at the fire; but in her heart she saw his every step, and counted the turns that kept him from her side.

"It makes a great difference!" he said abruptly.

The consciousness of the difference was flooding her reason, yet she did not speak. It should not be by her that the sanctification of her sacrifice was broached. The wish, the reminder, the reparation, all should be his! She nodded assent.

"A great difference," he repeated hoarsely. He smeared the dampness from his mouth and chin. "If—if my reputation were made now, Mary, I should ask you to be my wife."

And then she did not speak. There was an instant in which the wall swam before her in a haze, and the floor lurched. In the next, she was still fronting the fireplace; she was staring at it with the same intentness of regard; and his voice was sounding again, though she heard it dully:

"—while a poor one can't choose! I would—I'd ask you to marry me. I know what you've been to me—I don't forget—I know very well! But, as it is, it'd be madness—it'd be putting a rope round my own neck. I want you to hear how I'm situated. I want you to listen to the circumstances——"

"You won't . . . make amends?"

"I tell you I'm not my own master."

"You tell me that—that we're to part! We can't remain together any longer unless I'm your wife."

"We can't remain together any longer at all; that's what I'm coming to." He went back to the mantelpiece, and leant his elbows on it, kicking the half-hot coals. "I'm going to marry Miss Westland!"

He had said it; the echo of the utterance sung in his ears. Behind him her figure was motionless—its stillness frightened him. Intensified by the riotous ticking of the clock, through which his pulses were strained for the relief of a rustle, a breath, the pause grew unendurable.

“For God’s sake, why don’t you say something?” he exclaimed. He faced her impetuously, and they looked at each other across the table. “Mary, it’s my chance in life! She cares for me, don’t you see? You think me a scoundrel—don’t you see what a chance it is? What can I come to as I am? With her—she’ll get on, she has money—I shall rise, I shall be a manager, I shall get to London in time. Mary!”

“You’re going to . . . marry Miss Westland?”

“I must,” he said.

For the veriest second it was as if she struggled to understand. Then she threw out her hands dizzily, crying out.

“That is what your love was, then—a lie, a shameful lie?”

“It wasn’t; no, Mary, it was real! I cared for you—I did; the thing is forced on me!”

“‘Cared’? when you use your liberty like this? You ‘cared’? And I pitied you—you wrung

the soul of me with your despair—I forgave you keeping back the tale so long. I came to you to be your wife, and you went down on your knees and vowed you hadn't had the courage to tell me before, but your wife was living—some awful woman you couldn't divorce. I gave myself to you, I became the thing you can turn out of doors, all because I loved you, all because I believed in your love for me." She caught at her throat. "You deserved it, didn't you?—you justify it now so nobly, the faith that has made me a——"

"Mary!"

"Oh, I can say it!" she burst forth hysterically. "I *am*, you know; you have made me one—you and your 'love'! Why shouldn't I say it?"

"I told you the truth; if I had been free at that time——"

"When did you hear the news of the death? Answer me—it wasn't to-night?"

"What's the difference," he muttered, "when I heard?"

"Oh!" she moaned, "go away from me, don't come near me! You coward!"

She sank on to the edge of the sofa, rocking herself to and fro. The man roamed aimlessly around. Once or twice he glanced across at her,

but she paid no heed. His pipe was on the side-board; he filled it clumsily, and drew at it in nervous pulls.

He was the first to speak again.

"I know I seem a hound, I know it all looks very bad; but I don't suppose there's a man in five hundred who would refuse such an opportunity, for all that. No, nor one in five thousand, either! You won't see it in an unprejudiced light, of course; but it seems to me—yes, it does, and I can't help saying so—that if you were really as fond of me as you think, if my interests were really dear to you, you yourself 'd counsel me to leap at the chance, and, what's more, feel honestly glad that a prospect of success had come in my way. . . . You know what it means to me," he went on querulously; "you have been in the profession—at least, as good as in the profession—three years; you know that, in the ordinary course of events, I should never get any higher than I am, never play in London in my life. You know I've gone as far as I can ever expect to go without influence to back me, that in ten years' time I should be exactly what I am now, a leading-man for second-rate tours; and that ten years later I should be playing heavy fathers, or Lord knows what, still on the road, and done for—the fire all spent, wasted and worn

out in the provinces. That's what it would be; you've heard me say it again and again; and I should go on seeing Miss Somebody's son, and Mr. Somebody-else's daughter, with their parents' names to get them the engagements, playing prominent business in London theatres before they've learnt how to walk across a stage. Miss Westland's a fine-looking girl, and she knows a lot of Society people in town; and she has money enough to take a theatre there when she's lost her amateurishness a bit. Right off I shall be somebody, too—I shall manage her affairs. I'll have a big ad. in *The Era* every week: 'For vacant dates apply to Mr. Seaton Carew!' Oh, Mary, it's such a chance, such a lift! I *am* fond of you, you know I am; I care more for your little finger than for that woman's body and soul. Don't think me callous; it's damnable I've got to behave so—it takes all the light, all the luck, out of the thing that the way to it is so hard. I wish you could know what I'm feeling."

"I think I do know," she said bitterly—"better than you, perhaps. You're remembering how easily you could have taken the luck if your prayers to me had failed. And you're angered at me in your heart because the shame you feel spoils so much of the pleasure now."

He was humiliated to recognise that this was true. Her words described a mean nature, and his resentment deepened.

"When did you tell Miss Westland?" she faltered.

"Tell her?"

"What I am. That I'm not—— When was it?"

"This evening. It won't make any awkwardness for you; I mean, she won't speak of it to any of the others. Nobody will know for——"

"The whole company may know to-morrow!" she answered, drying her eyes. "Seeing that I shall be gone, they may as well know to-morrow as later. Oh, how they will talk, all of them, how they'll talk about me—the Bowmans, and that boy, too!"

"You'll be gone to-morrow—what do you say?"

"Do you suppose——"

"Mary, there are—I must make some—good heavens! how will you go?—where? Mary, listen: by-and-by, when something is settled, in—in a month or more—I want to arrange to send—I couldn't let you want for money, don't you see!"

"I would not take a penny from you," she said, "not the value of a penny, if I were dying.

I wouldn't, as Christ hears me! Our life together is over—I am going away.”

He looked at her aghast.

“Now,” he ejaculated, “at once? In the middle of the night?”

“Now at once—in the middle of the night.”

“Be reasonable”—he caught her fingers, and held them in miserable expostulation—“wait till day, at any rate. You're beside yourself, there's nothing to be gained by it. In the morning, if you *must*——”

“Oh!” she choked, “did you think I would stop here an hour after this? Did you—did you think so? You man! Yes, I should be no worse to *you*! but to *me*, the lowness of it! All in a moment the lowness of it! I've tried to feel that we were married; I always believed it was your trouble that I had to be what I was. If you had ever heard—as soon as it was possible, I thought every minute 'd have been a burden to you till you had made it all real and right. To stop with you now, the thing I am—despised—on sufferance——”

She dragged her hand from him and stumbled into the bedroom. There it was quite dark, and, shaking, she groped about for matches and the candle. A small bag, painted with the initials of “Mary Brettan,” her own name, was

under the toilet-table. She pulled it out, and, dropping on her knees before the trunk that held her clothes, hastily pushed in a little of the top-most linen. As she did so, her eyes fell on the wedding-ring that she wore. Painful at all times, the sight of it now was horrible. She strangled a sob, and, lifting the candlestick, peered stupidly around. By the parlour grate she could hear Tony knocking his pipe out on the bars. Above the washhand-stand a holland "tidy" contained her brushes; she rolled it up and crammed the bundle among the linen. In fastening the bag she hesitated, and looked irresolutely at the trunk. Going over to it, she paused again—left it; returned to it. She plunged her arm suddenly into its depths, and thrust the debated thing into her bag as if it burnt her. Across the photographer's address was written, "Yours ever, Tony." Her preparations for leaving him had not occupied ten minutes. Then she went back.

Her coat and hat lay by the piano where she had cast them when she came in from the theatre. The man watched her put them on.

"Here's your ring!" she said.

The tears were running down her cheeks; she dabbed at them with a handkerchief as she spoke. The baseness of it all was eating into him.

Though the ardour of his earlier passion was gone and his protestations of affection had been insults, her loss and her aversion served to display the growth of a certain attachment to her of which her possession and her constancy had left him unaware. Twice a plea to her to remain rose to his lips, and twice his tongue was heavy from self-interest, and from shame. He followed her instinctively into the passage; his limbs quaked, and his soul was cowed. She had already opened the door and set her foot on the step.

“Mary!” he gasped.

It was just beginning to get light. Under the faint paling of the sky the pavements gleamed cold and grey, forlornly visible in the darkness.

“Mary, don’t go!”

A rush of chill air swept out of the silence, raising the hair from her brow. The coat fell about her loosely in thick folds. He put out nervous hands to touch her, and nothing but these folds seemed assailable; they enveloped and denied her to him.

“Don’t go,” he stammered; “stay—forget what I’ve done!”

She saw the impulse at its worth, but she was grateful for its happening. She knew that he would regret it if she listened, knew that he knew

he would regret it. And yet, knowing and disdaining as she did, the gladfulness and thankfulness were there that he had spoken.

"I couldn't," she said—her voice was gentler; "there can never be anything between you and me any more. Good-bye, Tony."

She walked from him firmly. The receding figure was distinct — uncertain — merged in gloom. He stood gazing after it till it was gone——

CHAPTER II

THE town lay around her desolate. Her footsteps smote the wretchedly-laid street, and echoed on the loneliness. A cold wind blew in fitful gusts, nipping her cheeks and hands. On the vagueness of the market-place the gilded statue, with its sheen obscured, loomed shapeless as she passed. She heard the lumber and creak of a wagon straining out of sight; the quaver of a cock-crow, then one shriller and more prolonged; two or three thin screams in quick succession from a distant train. She knew, rather than decided, that she would go to London, though there would not be a familiar face to greet her in all its leagues of houses, not a door among its countless doors to reveal a friend. She would go there because she was adrift in England and "England" meant a blur of names equally unpitying, and London, somehow, seemed the natural place to book to.

Few persons' ruin leaves them alone at once; the crash generally sees some friends who prove loyal beneath the shock of the catastrophe and

drop away only afterwards under the wearisomeness of the worries. It is the situation of few to emerge from the wreck of a home without any personality dominating their consciousness as the counsellor to whom they must turn for aid. But it was the situation of Mary Brettan to be without a soul to turn to in the world; and briefly it had happened thus.

Her father had been a country doctor with a large practice among patients who could not afford to pay. From the standpoint of humanity his conduct was admirable; regarded from the domestic hearthstone perhaps it was a little less. The practitioner who neglected the wife of the Mayor in order to attend a villager, because the villager's condition was more critical, offered small promise of leaving his child provided for, and before Mary was sixteen the problems of the rent and butcher's book were as familiar to her as the surgery itself. The exemplary doctor and unpractical parent struggled along more or less placidly by means of the girl's surveillance. Had he survived her, it is difficult to determine what would have become of him; but, dying first, he had her protection to the end. She found herself after the funeral with a crop of bills, some shabby furniture, and the necessity for earning a living. The furniture and the bills were easy

to dispose of; they represented a sum in division with nothing over. The problem was, what was she fitted to do? She knew none of those things which used to be called "accomplishments," and which are to-day the elements of education. Her French was the French of "Le Petit Précepteur"; in German she was still bewildered by the article. And, a graver drawback, since the selling-price of education is an outrage on its cost—she had not been brought up to any trade. She belonged, in fact, and circumstances had caused her to discover it, to the ranks of refined incompetence: the incompetence that will not live by menial labour, because it is refined; the refinement that cannot support itself by any brain work, because it is incompetent. It was suggested that she might possibly enter the hospital of a neighbouring town and try to qualify for a nurse. She said, "Very well." By-and-by she was told that she could be admitted to the hospital, and that if she proved herself capable, that would be the end of her troubles. She said "Very well" again—and this time, "thank you."

She had a good constitution, and she saw that if she failed here she might starve at her leisure before any further efforts were put forth on her behalf; so she gave satisfaction in her probation,

and became at last a nurse like the others, composed and reliable. When that stage arrived, she owned to having fainted and suppressed the fact, after an early experience of the operating-room; her reputation was established, and it didn't matter now. The surgeon smiled.

Miss Brettan had been Nurse Brettan several years, when an actor who had met with an accident was brought into the hospital. The mishap had cost him his engagement, and he bewailed his fate to everyone who would listen. The person who heard most was she, since it was she who had the most to do for him, and she began by feeling sympathetic. He was a paying patient, or he would have had to limp away much sooner; as it was, it was many weeks before he was pronounced well enough to leave. And during those weeks she remembered what in the years of routine she had forgotten—that she was a woman capable of love.

One evening she learnt that the man really cared for her; he asked her to marry him. She stooped, and across the supper-tray, they kissed. Then she went upstairs, and cried with joy, and there was no happier woman in or out of any hospital in Christendom.

He talked to her about himself more than ever after this, suppressing only the one fact that he

lacked the courage to avow. And when at last he went away their engagement was made public, and it was settled that she should join him in London as soon as he was able to write for her to come.

There were many expressions of good-will heaped upon Nurse Brettan on the summer morning that she bade the Yaughton Hospital good-bye; a joint wedding-gift from the other nurses was presented, and everybody shook her hand and wished her a life of happiness, for she was popular. Carew met her at Euston. He had written that he had dropped into a good part, and that they would shortly be starting together on the tour, but that in the meanwhile they were to be married in town. It was the first time she had been to London. He took her to lodgings in Guilford Street, and here occurred their great scene.

He confessed that when he was a boy he had made a wild marriage; he had not set eyes on the woman since he discovered her past, but the law would not annul his blunder. He was bound to a harlot, and he loved Mary. Would she forgive his deception and be his wife in everything except the ceremony that could not be performed?

It was a very terrible scene indeed. For a

long while he believed her lost to him; she could be brought to give ear to his entreaties only by force, and he upbraided himself for not having disclosed his position in the first instance. He had excused his cowardice by calling it "expedience," but, to do him justice, he did not do justice to himself. The delay had been due far less to his sense of its expedience than to the tremors of his cowardice. Now he suffered scarcely less than she.

Had his plea been based on any but the insuperable obstacle that it was, it would have failed to a certainty; but his helplessness gave the sophistry of both full play. He harped on the "grandeur of the sacrifice" she would be making for him, and the phrase pierced her misery. He cried to her that it would be a heroism, and she wondered dully if it really would. She queried if there was indeed a higher duty than denial—if her virtue could be merely selfishness in disguise. His insistence on the nobility of consent went very far with her; it did seem a beautiful thing to let sunshine into her lover's life at the cost of her own transgression. And then, in the background, burnt a hot shame at the thought of being questioned and commiserated when she returned to the hospital with a petition to be reinstalled. The arguments of

both were very stale, and equally they blinked the fact that the practical use of matrimony is to protect woman against the innate fickleness of man. He demanded why, from a rational point of view, the comradeship of two persons should be any more sacred because a third person in a surplice said it was; and she, with his arms round her, began to persuade herself that he was a martyr, who had broken his leg that she might cross his path and give him consolation. Ultimately he triumphed; and a fortnight later she burst into a tempest of sobs—in suddenly realising how happy she was.

He introduced her to everybody as his wife; their “honeymoon” was spent in the, to her, unfamiliar atmosphere of a theatrical tour. One of the first places that the company visited was West Hartlepool, and he and she had lodgings outside the town in a little sea-swept village—a stretch of sand, and a lane or two, with a sprinkling of cottages—called Seaton Carew, from which, he told her, he had borrowed his professional name. She said, “Dear Seaton Carew!” and felt in a silly minute that she longed to strain the sunny prospect against her heart.

In the rawness of dawn a clock struck five, and she stood forsaken in the streets.

The myriad clocks of Leicester took up the

burden, and the air was beaten with their din. The way to the station appeared endless; yards were preternaturally lengthened; and ever pressing on, yet ever with a lonely vista to be covered, the walk began to be charged with the oppression of a nightmare, in which she pursued some illimitable road, seeking a destination that had vanished.

At last the building loomed before her, ponderously still, and she passed in over the cobstones. There were no indications of life about the place; the booking-office was fast shut, and between the dimly-burning lamps, the empty track of rails lay blue. For all she knew to the contrary, she would have to wait some hours.

By-and-by, however, a sleepy-eyed porter lounged into sight, and she learnt that there would be a train in a few minutes. Shortly after his advent she was able to procure a ticket—a third-class ticket, which diminished the little sum in her possession by eight shillings and a halfpenny; and returning to the custody of her bag, she waited miserably till the line of carriages thundered into view.

It was a wretched journey—a ghastly horror of a journey—but it did not seem particularly long; with nothing to look forward to, she had no cause to be impatient. Intermittently she

dozed, waking with a start as the train jerked to a standstill and the name of a station was bawled. When St. Pancras was reached, her limbs were cramped as she descended among the groups of dreary-faced passengers, and the load on her mind lay like a physical weight. She had not washed since the previous evening, and she made her way to the waiting-room, where a dejected attendant charged her twopence. Then, having paid twopence more to leave the bag behind her, she went out to search for a room.

A coffee-bar, with a quantity of stale pastry heaped in the window, reminded her that she needed breakfast. A man with blue shirt-sleeves rolled over red arms brought her tea and bread-and-butter at a sloppy table. The repast, if not enjoyable, served to refresh her and was worth the fourpence that she could very ill afford. Some of the faintness passed; when she stood in the fresh air again her head was clearer; the vagueness with which she had thought and spoken was gone.

It was not quite five minutes to eight; she wished she had rested in the waiting-room. To be seeking a lodging at five minutes to eight would look strange. Still, she could not reconcile herself to going back; and she was eager, besides, to find a home as quickly as possible,

yearning to be alone with a door shut and a pillow.

She turned down Judd Street, forlornly scanning the intersecting squalor. The tenements around her were not attractive. On the parlour-floor, limp chintz curtains hid the interiors, but the steps and the areas, and here and there a frouzy head and arm protruding for a milkcan, were strong in suggestion of slatternly discomfort. In Brunswick Square the aspect was more cheerful, but the rooms here were obviously above her means. She walked along, and came unexpectedly into Guilford Street, almost opposite the house where she had given herself to Tony. The sudden sight of it was not the shock that she would have imagined it would prove; indeed, she was sensible of a dull sort of wonder at the absence of sensation. But for the veranda and confirmatory number, the outside would have borne no significance to her; yet it had been in that house—— What a landmark in her life's history was represented by that house! What emotions had flooded her soul behind the stolid frontage that she had nearly passed without recognising it; how she had wept and suffered, and prayed and joyed within the walls that would have borne no significance to her but for a

veranda and the number that proclaimed it was so! The thoughts were deliberate; the past was not flashed back at her, she retraced it half tenderly in the midst of her trouble. None the less, the idea of taking up her quarters on the spot was eminently repugnant, and she turned several corners before she permitted herself to ring a bell.

Her summons was answered by a flurried servant-girl, who on hearing that she wanted a lodging, became helplessly incoherent—as is the manner of servant-girls where lodgings are let—and fled to the basement, calling “missis.”

Mary contemplated the hat-stand until the “missis” advanced towards her along the passage. There was a flavour of abandoned breakfast about missis, an air of interruption; and when she perceived that the stranger on the threshold was a young woman, and a charming woman, and a woman by herself, the air of interruption that she had been struggling to conceal all the way up the kitchen-stairs began to be coupled with an expression of defensive virtue.

“I am looking for a room,” said Mary.

“Yes,” said the householder, eyeing her askance.

“You have one to let, I think, by the card?”

"Yes, there's a room."

She made no movement to show it, however; she stood on the mat nursing her elbows.

"Can you let me see it—if it isn't inconvenient so early?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said the landlady. She preceded her to the top-floor, but with no alacrity. "This is it," she said.

It was a back attic of the regulation pattern: brown drugget, yellow chairs, and a bed of parti-coloured clothing. Nevertheless, it seemed to be clean, and Mary was prepared to take anything.

"What is the rent?" she asked wearily.

"Did you say your husband would be joining you?"

"My husband? No, I'm a widow."

There was a glance shot at her hand. She wore gloves, but saw that it would have been wiser to have told the truth and said "I am unmarried."

"As a single room, the rent is seven shillings. You'd be able to give me references, of course?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't do that," she said, not a little surprised. "I've only just arrived; my luggage is at the station."

"What do you work at?"

"Really!" she exclaimed; "I am looking for a

room. You want references; well, I will pay you in advance!"

"I don't take single ladies," answered the woman bluntly.

Mary looked at her bewildered; she thought that she had not made herself understood.

"I should be quite willing to pay in advance," she repeated. "I'm a stranger in London, so I can't refer you to anyone here; but I will pay for the first week now, if you like?"

"I don't take ladies; I must ask you to look somewhere else, please."

They went down in silence. Virtue turned the handle with its backbone stiff, and Mary passed out, giving a quiet "Good-day." Her blood was tingling under the inexplicable insolence of the treatment she had received, and she had yet to learn that it is possible for an unaccompanied woman to seek a lodging until she falls exhausted on the pavement; the unaccompanied woman being to the London landlady an improper person—inadmissible not because she is improper, but because her impropriety is presumably not monopolised.

During the next hour, repulse followed repulse. Sometimes, with the curt assertion that they didn't take ladies, the door was shut in her

face; frequently she was conducted to a room, only to be cross-examined and refused, as with her first venture, just when she was at the point of engaging it. Sometimes a room was displayed indifferently, and there were no questions put at all, but in these cases the terms asked were so exorbitant that she came out astounded, not realising the nature of the house.

It occurred to her to try the places where she would be known—not the one in Guilford Street, the associations of that would be unendurable—but some of the apartments that Carew and she had occupied when they had come to town between the tours. None of these addresses was in the neighbourhood, however, and the notion was too distasteful to be adopted save on impulse.

She set her teeth, and pulled bell after bell. Along Southampton Row, through Cosmo Place into Queen Square, she wandered, while the day grew brighter and brighter; down Devonshire Street into Theobald's Road, past the Holborn Town Hall. Amid these reiterated demands for references a sudden terror seized her; she remembered the need for the certificate that she had had when she quitted the hospital. She had never thought about it since. It might be lying crushed in a corner of the trunk that she had left behind in Leicester; it might long ago have

got destroyed—she did not know. It had never occurred to her that the resumption of her former calling would one day present itself as her natural resource. In ordinary circumstances the loss would have been a trifle; but she felt it an impossibility to refer directly to the Matron, because to do so would lead to the exposure of what had happened in the interval. The absence of a certificate therefore meant the absence of all testimony to her being a qualified nurse. As the helplessness of her plight rushed in upon her she trembled. How long must she not expect to wait for employment when she had nothing to speak for her? To go back to nursing would be more difficult than to earn a living in a capacity that she had never essayed. And she could wait so short a time for anything, so horribly short a time! She would starve if she did not find something soon!

Busses jogged by her laden with sober-faced men and women, bound for the vocations that sustained the white elephant of life. Shops already gave evidence of trade, and children with uncovered heads sped along the curb with a “ha’porth o’ milk,” or mysterious breakfasts folded in scraps of newspaper. Each atom of the awakening bustle passed her engrossed by its own existence, operated by its separate interests,

revolving in its individual world. London looked to her a city without mercy or impulse, populated to brimfulness, and flowing over. Every chink and crevice seemed stocked with its appointed denizens, and the hope of finding bread here which nobody's hand was clutching appeared presumption.

Eleven o'clock had struck—that is to say, she had been walking for more than three hours—when she saw a card with “Furnished Room to Let” suspended from a blind, and her efforts to gain shelter succeeded at last. It was an unpretentious little house, in an unpretentious turning; and a sign on the door intimated that it was the residence of “J. Shuttleworth, mason.”

A hard-featured woman was evoked by the dispirited knock. Seeing a would-be lodger who was dressed like a lady, she added eighteenpence to the rent that she usually asked. She asked five shillings a week, and the applicant agreed to it and was grateful.

“About your meals, miss?” said Mrs. Shuttleworth, when Mary had sunk on the upright wooden chair at the head of the truckle-bedstead. “Dinners I can't do for yer, but as far as break-fas', and a cup o' tea in the evening goes, you can 'ave a bit of something brought up when we

‘as our own. I suppose that’ll suit you, won’t it?”

“A cup of tea and some bread-and-butter,” answered Mary, “in the morning and afternoon, if you can manage it, will do very nicely, thank you.” She roused herself to the exigencies of the occasion. “How much will that be?”

“Oh, well, we shan’t break yer! You’ll pay the first week now?”

The rent was forthcoming, and one more superfluity in the jostle of existence profited by the misfortunes of another: going back to the wash-tub cheerful.

Upstairs the lodger remained motionless; she was so tired that it was a luxury to sit still, and for a while she was more alive to the bodily relief than the mental burden. It was afternoon by the time she faced the necessity for returning to St. Pancras for her bag; and, pushing up the rickety window to admit some air during her absence, she proceeded to the basement, to ascertain the nearest route.

She learnt that she was much nearer to the station than she had supposed, and in a little while she had her property in her possession again. Her head felt oddly light, and she was puzzled by the dizziness until she remembered

she had had nothing to eat since eight o'clock. The thought of food was sickening, though; and it was not till five o'clock, when the tea was furnished, with a hunch of bread, and a slap of butter in the middle of a plate, that she attempted to break her fast.

And now ensued a length of dreary hours, an awful purposeless evening, of which every minute was weighted with despair. Fortunately the weather was not very cold, so the absence of a fire was less a hardship than a lack of company; but the fatigue, which had been acting as a partial opiate to her trouble, gradually passed, and her brain ached with the torture of reflection.

With nothing to do but think, she sat in the upright chair, staring at the empty grate and picturing Tony during the familiar waits at the theatre. An evil-smelling lamp burned despondently on the table; outside, the street was discordant with the cries of children. To realise that it was only this morning that the blow had fallen upon her was impossible; an interval of several days appeared to roll between the poky attic and her farewell; the calamity seemed already old. "Oh, Tony!" she murmured. She got out his likeness. "Yours ever"—the mockery of it! She did not hate him, she did not even tell herself that she did; she contemplated the

faded photograph quite gently, and held it before her a long time. It had been taken in Manchester, and she recalled the afternoon that it was done. All sorts of trivialities in connection with it recurred to her. He was wearing a lawn tie, and she remembered that it had been the last clean one and had got mislaid. Their search for it, and comic desperation at its loss, all came back to her quite clearly. "Oh, Tony!" Her fancies projected themselves into his future, and she saw him in a score of different scenes, but always famous, and in his greatness with the memory of her flitting across his mind. Then she wondered what she would have done if she had borne him a child—whether the child would have been in the garret with her. But no, if he had been a father this wouldn't have happened! he was always fond of children; to have given him a child of his own would have kept his love for her aglow.

Presently a diversion was effected by the homecoming of Mr. Shuttleworth, evidently drunk, and abusing his wife with disjointed violence. Next the woman's voice arose shrieking recrimination, the babel subsiding amid staccato passages, alternately gruff and shrill.

The disturbance tended to obtrude the practical side of her dilemma, and the importance of

obtaining work of some sort speedily, no matter what sort, appalled her. The day was Wednesday, and on the Wednesday following, unless she was to go forth homeless, there would be the lodging to pay for again, and the breakfasts and teas supplied in the meanwhile. She would have to spend money outside as well; she had to dine, however poorly, and there were postage-stamps, and perhaps train fares, to be considered: some of the advertisers to whom she applied might live beyond walking distance. Altogether, she certainly required a pound. And she had towards it—with a sinking of her heart she emptied her purse to be sure—exactly two and ninepence.

CHAPTER III

NEXT morning her efforts were begun. It rained, and she began to understand what it means to the unemployed to tramp a city where two days of every four are wet.

To buy papers and examine them at home was out of the question; but she was aware that there were news-rooms where for a penny she could see them all. Directed to such an institution by a speckled boy, conspicuous for his hat and ears, she found several dejected-looking women turning over a heap of periodicals at a table. The dailies were spread on stands against the walls, and at a smaller table under the window lay a number of slips, with pens and ink, for the convenience of customers wishing to make memoranda of the vacant situations. She went first to *The Times*, because it was on the stand nearest to her, and proceeded from one paper to another until she had made a tour of the lot.

The "Wanted" columns were of the customary order; the needy endeavouring to gull the necessitous with specious phrases, and the well-

established prepared to sweat them without any disguise at all. A drapery house had a vacancy for a young woman "to dress fancy windows, and able to trim hats, etc., when desired"—salary fifteen pounds. There was a person seeking a general servant willing to pay twenty pounds a year for the privilege of doing the work. This advertisement was headed "Home offered to a Lady," and a few seconds were required to grasp the stupendous impudence of it. A side-street stationer, in want of a sales-woman, advertised for an "Apprentice at a moderate premium"; and the usual percentage of City firms dangled the decaying bait of "An opportunity to learn the trade." Her knowledge of the glut of experienced actresses enabled her to smile at the bogus theatrical managers who had "immediate salaried engagements waiting for amateurs of good appearance"; but some of the "home employment" swindles took her in, and, discovering nothing better, she jotted these addresses down.

From the news-room she went to a dairy, and dined on a glass of milk and a bun. And after an inevitable outlay on stamps and stationery, she returned to the lodging a shilling poorer than she had gone out.

Unacquainted with the wiles of the impostors

she was answering, the thought of her applications sustained her somewhat; it seemed to her that out of the several openings one at least should be practicable. She did not fail to make the calculation that most novices make in such circumstances; she reduced the promised earnings by half, and believed that she was viewing the prospect in a sober light which, if mistaken at all, erred on the side of pessimism.

The envelopes that she had enclosed came back to her late the following afternoon; and the circulars varied mainly in colour and in the prices of the materials that they offered for sale. In all particulars essential to prove them frauds to everybody excepting the piteous fools who must exist, to explain the advertisements' longevity, they were the same.

With the extinction of the hope, the darkness of her outlook was intensified, and henceforth she eschewed the offers of "liberal incomes" and confined her attention to the illiberal wages. Day after day she resorted to the news-room—one stray more whom the proprietor saw regularly—resolved not to relinquish her access to the papers while a coin remained to her to pay for admission. She wrote many letters, and spent her evenings vainly listening for the postman's knock. She attributed her repeated failures to

there being no mention of references in her replies; they were so concise and nicely written that she felt sure they could not have failed from any other reason. Probably her nicely-written notes were never read: merely tossed with scores of others, all unopened, into the wastepaper basket, after a selection had been made from the top thirty. This is the fate of most of the nicely-written notes that go in reply to advertisements in the newspapers; only, the people who compose them and post them with little prayers, fortunately do not suspect it. If they suspected it, they would lose the twenty-four hours' comfort of hugging a false hope to their souls; and an oasis of hope may be a desirable thing at the cost of a postage-stamp.

One evening an answer did come, and an answer in connection with a really beautiful "Wanted." When it was handed to her, she hardly dared to hope that it related to that particular situation at all. The advertisement had run:

"Secretary required by a Literary Lady. Must be sociable, and have no objection to travel on the Continent. Apply in own handwriting to C. B., care of Messrs. Furnival," etc.

The signature, however, was not "C. B.'s."

The communication was from Messrs. Furnival. They wrote that they judged by Miss Brettan's application that she would suit their client; and that on receipt of a half-crown—their usual booking fee—they would forward the lady's address.

If she had had a half-crown to send, she might have sent it; as it was, instead of remitting to Messrs. Furnival's office, she called there.

It proved to be a very small and very dark back room on the ground-floor, and Messrs. Furnival were represented by a stout gentleman of shabby apparel and mellifluous manner. Mary began by saying that she was the applicant who had received his letter about "C.B.'s" advertisement; but as this announcement did not seem sufficiently definite to enable the stout gentleman to converse on the subject with fluency and freedom, she added that "C.B." was a literary lady who stood in need of a secretary.

On this he became very vivacious indeed. He told her that her chance of securing the post was an excellent one. No, it was not a certainty, as she appeared to have understood, but he did not think she had much occasion for misgiving; her speed in shorthand was in excess of the rate for which their client had stipulated.

She said: "Why, I especially stated that if she wanted someone who knew shorthand, I should be no use!"

He said: "So you did! I meant to say, your type-writing was your recommendation."

"Mr. Furnival," she exclaimed, "I wrote, 'I do not know shorthand, and I am not a typist'! You must be confusing me with someone else. Perhaps you have answered another application as well?"

Perhaps he had.

"You're my first experience of an applicant for a secretaryship who hasn't learnt shorthand or type-writing," he said in an injured tone. "Of course, if you don't know either, you'd be no good at all—not a bit."

"Then," she said, "why did you ask me to send you half a crown?"

Before he could spare time to enlighten her as to his reason for this line of action, they were interrupted by an urchin who deposited an armful of letters on the table. The gentleman seemed pleased to see them, and she came away wondering how many of the women who Messrs. Furnival "judged would suit their client" enclosed postal-orders to pay the "fee."

Quite ineffectually she visited some legitimate agencies, and once she walked to Battersea in

time to learn that the berth that was the object of her journey had just been filled. Even when one walks to Battersea, and dines for twopence, however, the staying-powers of two-and-nine-pence are very limited; and the dawning of the dreaded date for the bill found her capital exhausted.

Among her scanty possessions, the only article that she could suggest converting into money was a silver watch that she wore attached to a guard. It had belonged to her as a girl; she had worn it as a nurse; it had travelled with her on tour during her life with Carew. What a pawnbroker would lend her on it she did not know, but she supposed a sovereign. Had she been better off, she would have supposed two sovereigns, for she was as ignorant of its value as of the method of pledging it; but being destitute, a pound looked to her a very substantial amount. She made her way heavily into the street. She felt that her errand was printed on her face, and when she reached and paused beneath the sign of the three balls, all the passers-by seemed to be watching her.

The window offered a pretext for hesitation. She stood inspecting the collection behind the glass; perhaps anyone who saw her go in might imagine it was with the intention of buying some-

thing! She was nerving herself to the necessary pitch when, giving a final glance over her shoulder, she saw a bystander looking at her steadily. Her courage took flight, and she sauntered on, deciding to explore for a shop in a more secluded position.

Though she was ashamed of her retreat, the respite was a relief to her. It was not until she came to three more balls that she perceived that the longer she delayed, the worse she would feel. She went hurriedly in. There was a row of narrow doors extending down a passage, and, pulling one open, she found the tiny compartment occupied by a woman and a bundle. Starting back, she adventured the next partition, which proved to be vacant; and standing away from the counter, lest her profile should be detected by her neighbour in distress, she waited for someone to come to her.

Nobody taking any notice, she rapped to attract attention. A young man lounged along, and she put the watch down.

"How much?" he said.

"A pound."

He caught it up and withdrew, conveying the impression that he thought very little of it. She thought very little of it herself directly it was in his hand. His hand was a masterpiece of

expression, whereas his voice never wavered from two notes.

"Ten shillings," he said, reappearing.

"Ten shillings is very little," she murmured.

"Surely it's worth more than that?"

"Going to take it?"

He slid the watch across to her.

"Thank you," she said; "yes."

A doubt whether it would be sufficient crept over her the instant she had agreed, and she wished she had declined the offer. To call him back, however, was beyond her; and when he returned it was with the ticket.

"Name and address?"

New to the requirements of a pawnbroker, she stammered the true one, convinced that the woman with the bundle would overhear and remember. Even then she was dismayed to find the transaction wasn't concluded; he asked her for a halfpenny, and, with the blood in her face, she signified that she had no change. At last though, she was free to depart, with a handful of silver and coppers; and guiltily transferring the money to her purse when the shop was well behind, she reverted to routine.

It was striking five when she mounted to the attic, and she saw that Mrs. Shuttleworth, with the punctuality peculiar to cheap landladies

when the lodger is out, had already brought up the tray. On the plate was her bill; she snatched at it anxiously, and was relieved to find it ran thus:

	s.	d.
Bread	1	2
Butter		10
Milk		3½
Tea		6
Oil		2
Shuger		2½
To room til next Wensday	5	0
	8	2

So far, then, she had been equal to emergencies, and another week's shelter was assured. The garret began to assume almost an air of comfort, refined by her terror of losing it. When she reflected that the week divided her from actual starvation, she cried that she *must* find something to do—she must! Then she realised that she could find it no more easily because it was a case of “must” than if it had been simply expedient, and the futility of the feminine “must,” when she was already doing all she could do, served to accentuate her helplessness. She prayed passionately, without being able to feel much confidence in the efficacy of prayer, and told herself that she did not deserve that God should listen to her, because she was guilty, and

sinful, and bad. She did not seek consolation in repeating that it was always darkest before dawn, nor strive to fortify herself with any other of the aphorisms belonging to the vocabulary of sorrow for other people. The position being her own, she looked it straight in the eyes, and admitted that the chances were in favour of her being very shortly without a bed to lie on.

Each night she came a few pence nearer to the end; each night now she sat staring from the window, imagining the sensations of wandering homeless. And at last the day broke—a sunless and chilly day—when she rose and went out possessed of one penny, without any means of adding to it. This penny might be reserved to diminish the hunger that would seize her presently, or she might give herself a final chance among the newspapers. Having breakfasted, she decided on the final chance.

As she turned the pages her hands trembled, and for a second the paragraphs swam together. The next instant, standing out clearly from the sea of print, she saw an advertisement like the smile of a friend:

“Useful Companion wanted to elderly lady; one with some experience of invalids preferred. Apply personally, between 3 and 5, ‘Trebartha,’ N. Finchley.”

If it had been framed for her, it could hardly have suited her better. The wish for personal application was itself an advantage, for in conversation, she felt, the obstacle of having no references could be surmounted with far less trouble than by letter. A string of frank allusions to the difficulty, a dozen easy phrases, leapt into her mind, so that, in fancy, the interview was already in progress, and terminating with pleasant words in the haven of engagement.

She searched no further, and it was not till she was leaving that she remembered the miles that she would have to walk. To start so early, however, would be useless, so on second thoughts she determined to pass the morning where she was.

She was surprised to discover that she was not singular in this decision, and she wondered if all the clients that stayed so long had anywhere else to go. Many of them never turned a leaf, but sat at the table dreamily eyeing a journal as if they had forgotten that it was there. She watched the people coming in, noting the unanimity with which they made for the advertisement-sheets first, and speculating as to the nature of the work they sought.

There was a woman garbed in black, downcast and precise; she was a governess, manifestly.

Once, when she had been young, and insolent with the courage of youth, she would have mocked a portrait looking as she looked now; there was little enough mockery left in her this morning. She quitted the dailies unrewarded, and proceeded to the table, her thin-lipped mouth set a trifle harder than before. A girl with magenta feathers in her hat bounced in, tracing her way down the columns with a heavy fore-finger, and departing nonchalantly with a blotted list. This was a domestic servant, Mary understood. A shabby man of sinister expression covered an area of possibilities: a broken-down tutor perhaps, a professional man gone to the bad. He looked like Mephistopheles in the prompter's clothes, she thought, contemplating him with languid curiosity. The reflections flitted across the central idea while she sat nervously waiting for the hours to pass, and when she considered it was time at last, she asked the newsagent in which direction Finchley lay. She omitted to mention that she had to walk there, but she obtained sufficient information about a tram-route to guide her up to Hampstead Heath, where of course she could inquire again.

The sun gave no promise of shining, and a bleak wind, tossing the rubbish of the gutters into little whirlpools, made pedestrianism ex-

ceedingly unpleasant. She was dismayed to find on how long a journey she was bound; she arrived at the tram-terminus already tired, and then learnt that she was not half-way to Finchley. It was nothing but a name to her, and steadily trudging along a road that extended itself before her eternally she began to fear that she would never reach her goal at all. To add to the discomfort, it was snowing slightly now, and she grew less sanguine with every hundred yards. The vision of the smiling lady, the buoyancy of her own glib sentences, faded from her, and the thought of the utter abjectness that would come of refusal made the salvation of acceptance appear much too wonderful to occur.

When she reached it, "Trebartha" proved to be a stunted villa in red brick. It was one of a row, each of the other stunted villas being similarly endowed with a name befitting a domain; and suspense catching discouragement from the most extraneous details, Mary's heart sank as the housemaid disclosed the badly-lighted passage.

She was ushered into the sitting-room; and the woman who entered presently had been suggested by it. She seemed the natural complement of the haggard prints, of the four cumbersome chairs in a line against the wall, of

the family Bible on the crochet tablecover. She wore silk, dark and short—plain, except for three narrow bands of velvet at the hem. She wore a gold watch-chain hanging round her neck, garlanded over her portly bosom. She said she was the invalid lady's married daughter, and her tone implied a consciousness of that higher merit which the woman whose father has left her comfortably off feels over the woman whose father hasn't.

"You've called about my mother's advertisement for a companion?" she said.

"Yes; I've had a long experience of nursing. I think I should be able to do all you require."

"Have you ever lived as companion?"

"No," said Mary, "I have never done that, but—but I think I'm companionable; I don't think I'm difficult to get on with."

"What was your—won't you sit down?—what was your last place?"

Mary moistened her lips.

"I am," she said, "rather awkwardly situated. I may as well tell you at once that I am a stranger here, and—do you know—I find that's a great bar in the way of my getting employment? Not being known, I've, of course, no friends I can refer people to, and—well, people always seem to think the fact of being a stranger in a

city is rather a discreditable thing. I have found that! They do." She looked for a gleam of response in the stolid countenance, but it was as void of expression as the furniture. "As I say, I have had a lengthy experience of nursing; I—it sounds conceited—but I should be exceedingly useful. It's just the thing I am fitted for."

The married daughter asked: "You have been a nurse, you say? But not here?"

"Not here," said Mary, "no. Of course, that doesn't detract from——"

"Oh, quite so. We've had several young women here already to-day. Do I understand you to mean there is nobody at all you can give as a reference?"

"Yes, that unfortunately is so. I do hope you don't consider it an insuperable difficulty? You know you take servants without 'characters' sometimes when——"

"I *never* take a servant without a 'character.' I have never done such a thing in my life."

"I did not mean you personally," said Mary, with hasty deprecation; "I was speaking——"

"I'm most particular on the point; my mother is most particular, too."

"Generally speaking. I meant people do take servants without 'characters' occasionally when they are hard pushed."

"Our own servants are only too wishful to remain with us. My mother has had her present cook eight years, and the last one was only induced to leave because a young man—a young man in quite a fair way of business—made her an offer of marriage. *She* had been here even longer than eight years—twelve I think it was, or thirteen. It was believed at the time that what first attracted the young man's attention to her was the many years that my mother had retained her in our household. I'm sure there are no circumstances under which my mother 'd consent to receive a young person who could give no proof of her trustworthiness and good conduct."

"Do you mean that you can't engage me? It—it's a matter of life and death to me," exclaimed Mary; "pray let me see the lady!"

"Your manner," said the married daughter, "is strange. Quite authoritative for your position!" She rose. "You'll find it helpful to be less haughty when you speak, less opinionated; your manner is very much against you. Oh, my word! no violence, if you please, miss!"

"Violence?" gasped Mary; "I'm not violent. It was my last hope, that's all, and it's over. I wish you good-day."

So much had happened in a few minutes—

inside and out—that the roads were whitening rapidly and the flutter of snow had developed into a steady fall. At first she was scarcely sensible of it; the anger in her heart kept the cold out, and carried her along in a semi-rush. Words broke from her breathlessly. She felt that she had fallen from a high estate; that the independence of her life with Carew had been a period of dignity and power; that erstwhile she could have awed the dull-witted philistine who had humbled her. “The hateful woman! Oh, the wretch! To have to sue to a creature like that!” Well, she would starve now, she supposed, her excitement spending itself. She would die of starvation, like characters in fiction, or the people one read of in the newspapers; the newspapers called it “exposure,” but it was the same thing; “exposure” sounded less offensive to the other people who read about it, that was all. The force of education is so strong that, much as she insisted on such a death, and close as she had approached to it, she was unable to realise its happening to her. She told herself that it must; the world was of a sudden horribly wide and empty; but for Mary Brettan actually to die like that had an air of exaggeration about it still. Pushing forward, she pondered on it, and the

fact came close; the sensation of the world's widening about her grew stronger. She felt alone in the midst of illimitable space. There seemed nothing around her, nothing tangible, nothing to catch at. O God! how tired she was! she couldn't go on much further.

The snow whirled against her in gusts, clinging to her hair, and filling her eyes and nostrils. Exhaustion was overpowering her. And still how many miles? Each of the benches that she passed was a fresh temptation; and at last she dropped on one, too tired to stand, wet and shivering, and shielding her face from the storm.

She dropped on it like any tramp or stray. Having held out to the uttermost, she did not know whether she would ever get up again—did not think about it, and did not care. Her limbs ached for relief, and she seized it on the high-road because relief on the high-road was the only kind attainable.

And it was while she cowered there that another figure appeared in the twilight, the figure of a tall old man carrying a black bag. He came smartly down a footpath, gazing to right and left as for something that should be waiting for him. Not seeing it, he whistled, and Mary looked up. A trap was backed from the corner

of the road. Then the man with the bag stared at her, and after an instant of hesitation, he spoke.

"It's a dirty nicht," he said, "for ye tae be sittin' there. I'm thinking ye're no' weel?"

"Not very," she said.

He inspected her undecidedly.

"An' ye'll tak' your death o' cold if ye dinna get up, it's verra certain. Hoots! ye're shakin' wi' it noo! Bide a wee, an' I'll put some warmth intae ye, young leddy."

Without any more ado, he deposited the bag at her side and opened it. And, astonishing to relate, the black bag was fitted with a number of little bottles, one of which he extracted, with a glass.

"Is it medicine?" she asked wonderingly.

"Medicine?" he echoed; "nae, it's nae medicine; it's 'Four Diamonds S.O.P.' I'm gi'en ye. It's a braw sample o' Pilcher's S.O.P., ma lassie; nothin' finer in the trade, on the honour o' Macpheerson! Noo ye drink that doon; it's speerit, an' it'll dae ye guid."

She took his advice, gulping the spirit while he watched her approvingly. Its strength diffused itself through her in ripples of heat, raising her courage, and yet, oddly enough, making her want to cry.

Mr. Macpherson contemplated the little bottle solemnly, shaking his head at it with something that sounded like a sigh.

"An' whaur may ye be goin'?" he queried, replacing the cork.

"I am going to town," she answered. "I was walking home, only the storm——"

"Tae toon? Will ye no' ha'e a lift along o' me an' the lad? I'll drive ye intae toon."

"Have you to go there?" she asked, overjoyed.

"There'd be th' de'il tae pay if I stayed awa'. Ay, I ha'e tae gang there, and as fast as the mare can trot. Will yet let me help ye in?"

"Yes," she said; "thank you very much."

He hoisted her up. And she and her strange companion, accompanied by an urchin who never uttered a word, made a brisk start.

"I am so much obliged to you," she murmured, rejoicing; "you don't know!"

"There's nae call for ony obleigation; it's verra welcome ye are. I'm thinkin' the sample did ye a lot o' guid, eh?"

"It did indeed; it has made me feel a different woman."

"Eh, but it's a gran' speerit!" said the old gentleman with reviving ardour. "There's nae need to speak for it, an' that's a fact; your ain tongue sings its perfection to ye as ye sup it

doon. Ye may get ither houses to serve ye cheaper, I'm no' denyin' that; but tae them that can place the rale article there's nae house like Pilcher's. And Pilcher's best canna be beaten in the trade. I ha'e nae interest tae lie tae ye, ye ken; nor could I tak' ye in wi' the wines and speerits had I the mind. There's the advantage wi' the wines and speerits; ye canna deceive! Ye ha'e the sample, an' ye ha'e the figure—will I book the order or will I no'?"

"It's your business then, Mr——?"

"Will ye no' tak' my card?" he said, producing a large one; "there, put it awa'. Should ye ever be in need, ma lassie, a line to Macpheerson, care o' the firm——"

"How kind of you!" she exclaimed.

"No' a bit," he said; "ye never can tell what may happen, and whether it's for yoursel' ye need it, or a recommendation, ye'll ken ye're buying at the wholesale price."

She glanced at him with surprise, and looked away again. And they drove for several minutes in silence.

"Maybe ye ken some family whaur I'd be likely tae book an order noo?" remarked Mr. Macpherson incidentally. "Sherry? dae ye no' ken o' a family requirin' sherry? I can dae them sherry at a figure that'll tak' th' breath frae

them. Ye canna suspect the profit—th' weecked ineequitous profit—that sherry's retailed at; wi' three quotations tae the brand often eno', an' a made-up wine at that! Noo, I could supply your frien's wi' 'Crossbones'—the finest in the trade, on the honour of Macpherson—if ye happen tae ha'e ony who——"

"I don't," she said, "happen to have any."

"There's the family whaur ye're workin', we'll say; a large family maybe, wi' a cellar. For a large family tae be supplied at the wholesale figure——"

"I am sorry, but I don't work."

"Ye don't work, an' ye ha'e no frien's?" He peered at her curiously. "Then, ma dear young leddy, ye'll no' think me impertinent if I ax ye how th' de'il ye live?"

The wild idea shot into her brain that perhaps he might be able to put her into the way of something—somewhere—somehow!

"I'm a stranger in London," she answered, "looking for employment—quite alone."

"Eh," said Mr. Macpherson, "that's bad, that's verra bad!"

He whipped up the horse, and after the momentary comment lapsed into reverie. She called herself a fool for her pains, and stared dumbly across the melancholy fields.

"Whauraboots are ye stayin'?" he demanded, after they had passed the Swiss Cottage.

She told him. "Please don't let me take you out of your way," she added.

"Ye're no' verra far frae ma ain house," he declared. "Ye had best come in an' warm before ye gang on hame. Ye are in nae hurry, I suppose?"

"No, but——"

"Oh, the mistress will nae mind it. Ye just come in wi' me!"

Their conversation progressed by fits and starts till his domicile was reached. Leaving the trap to the care of the boy, who might have been a mute for any indication he had given to the contrary, Mr. Macpherson led her into a parlour, where a kettle steamed invitingly on the hob.

He was greeted by a little woman, evidently the wife referred to; and a rosy offspring, addressed as Charlotte, brought her progenitor a pair of slippers. His introduction of Mary to his family circle was brief.

"'Tis a young leddy," he said, "I gave a lift to. But I dinna ken your name?"

"My name is Brettan," she replied. Then, turning to the woman: "Your husband was kind enough to save me from walking home from

Finchley, and now he has made me come in with him."

"It was a braw nicht for a walk," opined Macpherson.

"I'm sure I'm glad to see you, miss," responded the woman in cheery Cockney. "Come to the fire and dry yourself a bit, do!"

The initial awkwardness was very slight, for Mary's experiences in bohemia were serviceable here. The people were well-intentioned, too, and, meeting with no embarrassment to hamper their heartiness, they grew speedily at ease. It reminded the guest of some of her arrivals on tour; of one in particular, when the previous week's company had not left and she and Tony had traversed half Oldham in search of rooms, finally sitting down with their preserver to bread-and-cheese in her kitchen. It was loathsome how Tony kept recurring to her, and always in episodes when he had been jolly and affectionate!

"Your husband tells me he is in the wine business," she observed at the tea-table.

"He is, miss; and never you marry a man who travels in that line," returned the woman, "or the best part of your life you won't know for rights if you're married or not!"

"He's away a good deal, you mean?"

“Away? He’s just home about two months in the year—a fortnight at the time, that’s what he is! All the rest of it’s traipsing about from place to place like a wandering gipsy. Charlotte says time and again, ‘Ma, have I got a pa, or ’aven’t I?’—don’t yer, Charlotte?”

“Pa’s awful!” said Charlotte, with her mouth full of bread-and-marmalade. “Never mind, pa, you can’t help it!”

“Eh, it’s a sad pursuit!” rejoined her father gloomily. In the glow of his own fireside Mary perceived with surprise that his enthusiasm for “his wines and speerits” had vanished. “Awa’ frae your wife an’ bairn, pandering tae th’ veecious courses that ruin the immortal soul! Every heart kens its ain bitterness, young leddy; and Providence in its mysterious wisdom never meant me for the wine-and-speerit trade.”

“Oh lor,” said Charlotte, “ma’s done it!”

“It was na your mither,” said Mr. Macpherson; “it’s ma ain conscience, as well ye ken! Dae I no’ see the travellers themselves succumb tae th’ cussed sippin’ and tastin’ frae mornin’ till nicht? There was Burbage, I mind weel, and there was Broun; guid men both—no better men on th’ road! Whaur’s Burbage noo—whaur’s Broun?”

"Fly away, Peter, fly away, Paul!" interpolated Charlotte.

"Gone!" continued Mr. Macpherson, responding to his own inquiry with morbid unction. "Deed! The Lord be praised, I ha'e the guid sense tae withstand th' infeernal tipplin' masel'. Mony's the time, when I'm talkin' tae a mon in the way o' business, ye ken, I turn the damned glass upside down when he is na lookin.' But there's the folk I sell tae, an' the ithers; what o' them? It's ma trade to praise the evil—tae tak' it into the world, spreadin' it broadcast for the destruction o' monkind. Eh, ma responsibeelity is awfu' tae contemplate."

"I'm sure, James, you mean first class," said the little woman weakly. "Come, light your pipe comfortable, now, and don't worrit, there's a good man!"

The traveller waved the pipe aside.

"There's a still sma' voice," he said, "ye canna silence wi' 'bacca; ye canna silence it wi' herbs nor wi' fine linen. It's wi' me noo, axin' queestions. It says: 'Macpheerson, how dae ye justefy thy wilfu' conduct? Why dae ye gloriefy the profeets o' th' airth above thy speeritual salvation, mon? Dae ye no ken that orphans are goin' dinnerless through thy eloquence, an'

widows are prodigal wi' curses on a' thy samples an' thy ways?' I canna answer. There are nights when the voice will na let me sleep, ye're weel aware; there are nights——"

"There are nights when you're most trying, James, I know."

"Woman, it's the warnin' voice that comes tae a sinner in his transgression! Are there no' viseetations eno' about me, an' dae I no' turn ma een frae them; hardenin' ma heart, and pursuin' ma praise o' Pilcher's wi' a siller tongue? There was a mon ane day at the Peacock—a mon in ma ain inseedious line—an' he swilled his bottle o' sherry, an' he called for his whusky-an'-watter, and he got up on his feet speechifyin', after the commercial dinner. 'The Queen, gentlemen!' he cries, liftin' his glass; an' wi' that he dropped deed, wi' the name o' the royal leddy on his lips! He was a large red mon—he would ha' made twa o' me."

He seemed to regard the circumference of the deceased as additionally ominous. His arms were extended in representation of it, and he waved them aloft as if to intimate that Charlotte might detect Nemesis in the vicinity preparing for a swoop.

"You take the thing too seriously," said Mary. "Nine people out of ten have to be what they

can, you know; it is only the tenth who can be what he likes."

The little woman inquired what her own calling was.

"I am very sorry to say I haven't any," she answered. "I'm doing nothing."

There was a moment's constraint.

"Unfortunately I know nobody here," she went on; "it's very hard to get anything when there's no one to speak for you."

"It must be! But, lor! you must bear up. It's a long lane that has no turning, as they say."

"Only there is no telling where the turning may lead; a lane is better than a bog."

"Wouldn't she do for Pattenden's?" suggested the woman musingly.

"For whom?" exclaimed Mary. "Do you think I can get something? Who are they?"

"James?"

"Pattenden's?" he repeated. "An' what would she dae at Pattenden's?"

"Why, be agent, to be sure—same as you were!"

Mary glanced from one to the other with anxiety.

"Weel, noo, that isn't at a' a bad idea," said Mr. Macpherson meditatively; "dae ye fancy ye could sell books, young leddy, on commession—

a hauf-sovereign, say, for every order ye took? I'm thinkin' a young woman micht dae a verra fair trade at it."

"Oh yes," she replied; "I'm sure I could. Half a sovereign each one? Where do I go? Will they take me?"

"I dinna antecipate ye'll fin' much deefficulty aboot them takin' ye: they dinna risk onythin' by that! I'll gi'e ye the address. They are publishers, and ye just ax for their Mr. Collins when ye go there; tell him ye're wishful tae represent them wi' ane o' their publeecations. If ye like I'll write your name on ane o' ma ain cards; an' ye can send it in tae him."

"Oh, do!" she said.

"Ye must na imagine it's a fortune ye'll be makin'," he observed; "it's different tae ma ain position wi' the wines an' speerits, ye ken: wi' Pilcher's it's a fixed salary, an' Pilcher's pay ma expenses."

"Pilcher's pay *our* expenses!" affirmed Charlotte the thoughtful.

"They dae," acquiesced the traveller; "there's a sicht o' saving oot o' sax-and-twenty shillin's a day tae an economical parent. But wi' Pat-tenden's it's precarious; ane week guid, an' anither week bad."

"I am not afraid," said Mary boldly; "what-

ever I do, it is better than nothing! I'll go there to-morrow, the first thing. Very many thanks; and to you too, Mrs. Macpherson, for thinking of it."

"I'm sure I'm glad I did; there's no saying but what you may be doing first-rate after a bit. It's a beginning for you, any way."

"That it is! But why can't the publishers pay a salary, the same as your husband's firm?"

"Ah! they don't; anyhow, not at the beginning. Besides, James has been with Pilcher's ten years now; he wasn't earning so much when he started with them."

"'Spect one reason is because such a heap more people buy spirits than books!" said Charlotte. "Pa!"

"Eh, ma lassie?"

"The lady's going to be an agent——"

"Weel?"

"Then, pa," said Charlotte, "won't we all drink to the lady's luck in a sample?"

"Ye veecious midget," ejaculated her father wrathfully, "are ye no' ashamed tae mak' sic a proposection? Ye'll no' drink a sample, will ye, young leddy?"

"I will not indeed!" answered Mary.

"No' but what ye're welcome."

"Thanks," she said; "I will not, really."

“Eh, but ye will, then,” he exclaimed; “a sma’ sample, ye an’ Mrs. Macpheerson! Whaur’s ma bag?”

In spite of her protestations he drew a bottle out, and the hostess produced a couple of glasses from the cupboard.

“Port!” he said. “The de’il’s liquors a’ o’ them; but, if there’s a disteenction, maybe a wee drappie o’ the ‘Four Grape Balance’ deserves mon’s condemnation least.” His conflicting emotions delayed the toast for some time. “The de’il’s liquors!” he groaned again, fingering the bottle irresolutely. “Eh, but it’s the ‘Four Grape Balance,’ ” he murmured with reluctant admiration, eyeing the sample against the light.

“There! Ye may baith o’ ye drink it doon! But masel’, I wouldna touch a drap. An’ as for ye, ye wee Cockney bairn, if I catch ye tastin’ onything stronger than tea in a’ your days, or knowin’ the flavour o’ the perneecious stuff it’s your affleected father’s duty tae lure the unsuspeecious minds wi’—temptin’ the frail tae their eternal ruin, an’ servin’ the de’il when his sicht is on the Lord—I’ll leather ye!”

Charlotte giggled nervously—Figaro-wise, that she might not be obliged to weep; and Mrs. Macpherson, raising the glass to her lips, said “Luck!”

"Luck!" they all echoed.

And Mary, conscious that the career would be no heroic one, was also conscious she was not a heroine. "I am," she said to herself, "just a real unhappy woman, in very desperate straits. So let me do whatever turns up, and be profoundly grateful that anything can be done at all."

CHAPTER IV

THE wealth of Messrs. Pattenden and Sons, which was considerable, was not indicated by the arrangement of their London branch. A flight of narrow stairs, none too clean, led to a pair of doors respectively painted "Warehouse" and "Private"; and having performed the superfluous ceremony of knocking at the former, Mary found herself in front of a rough counter, behind which two or three young men were busily engaged in stacking books. There were books in profusion, books in virginity, books tempting and delightful to behold. Volume upon volume, crisp in cover and shiny of edge, they were piled on the table and heaped on the floor; and the young men handled them with as little concern as if they had been grocery. Such is the force of custom.

In response to her inquiry, her name and the card were despatched to Mr. Collins by a miniature boy endowed with a gape that threatened to lift his head off, and, pending the interview, she attempted to subdue her nervousness.

A man with a satchel bustled in, and made

hurried reference to "Vol. two of the *Dic.*" and "The fourth of the *Ency.*" Against the window an accountant with a fresh complexion and melancholy mien totted up columns.

Seeing that everybody—the melancholy accountant not excepted—favoured her with a gratified stare, she concluded that women were infrequently employed here, and she trembled with the fear that her application might be refused. She assured herself that the Scotsman would never have spoken so confidently of a favourable issue if it had not been reasonable to expect it, but the doubt having entered her head, it was difficult to dispel. It occurred to her that she could astonish the accountant by telling him that she was on the brink of destitution. The perspiring young packers, sure of their dinners by-and-by, looked to her individuals to be felicitated on their prosperity, and, luckless as they were, it is a fact that a person's lot is seldom so poor but that another person worse off can be found to envy it. The book-keeper who has grown haggard in the firm's employ at a couple of pounds a week is the envy of the clerk who lives on eighteen shillings, and the wight who sweeps the office daily thinks how happy he would be in the place of the clerk. The urchin who hawks matches in the rain envies the shel-

tered office-boy, and the waif without coppers to invest envies the match-seller. The grades of misery are so infinite, and the instinct of envy is so ingrained, that when two vagrants crouched under a bridge have tightened their belts to still the gnawings of their hunger, one of the pair will find something to be envious of in the rags of the outcast suffering at his side.

Messrs. Pattenden's youngster reappeared, and with a yawn so tremendous that it eclipsed his previous effort, said:

"Miss Brettan!"

Mr. Collins was seated in a compartment just large enough to contain a desk and two chairs. He signed Mary to the vacant one, and gave her a steady glance of appreciation. A man who had risen to the position of conducting the travelling department of a firm that published on the subscription plan, he was something of a reader of temperament; a man who had risen to the position by easy stages while yet young, he was kindly and had not lost his generosity on the way.

"Good-morning," he said; "what can I do for you?"

"I want to represent you with one of your publications," she answered. "Mr. Macpherson was good enough to offer me the introduction,

and he thought you would be able to arrange with me." The nervousness was scarcely visible. She had entered well, and spoke without hesitancy, in a musical voice. All these things Mr. Collins noted. Before she had explained her desire he had wished that she might have it. The book-agent is of many types, and skilful advertisements hinting at noble earnings, without being explicit about the nature of the pursuit, had brought penurious professional men and reduced gentlewomen on to that chair time and again. But these applicants had generally cooled visibly when the requirements of the vocation were insinuated; and here was one, as refined as any of them, who came comprehending that she would have to canvass, and prepared to do it! Mr. Collins nearly rubbed his hands.

"What experience have you had?"

"In—as an agent? None. But I suppose with a fair amount of intelligence that doesn't matter very much?"

"Not at all." For once he was almost at a loss. As a rule it was he who advocated the attempt, and the novice on the chair who grew reluctant.

"I take it," said Miss Brettan, concealing rapture, "that the art of the business is to sell books to people who don't want to buy them?"

"Just so; tact, and the ability to talk about your specimen is what is wanted. Always watch the face of the person you are showing it to and don't look at the specimen itself. You must know that by heart."

"Oh!"

"Suppose you're showing an encyclopedia! As you turn over the plates, you should be able to tell by his eyes when you have come to one that illustrates a subject that he is interested in. Then talk about that subject—how fully it is dealt with. See?"

"I see."

"If you think he looks like a married man and is old enough to have a family, say how useful an encyclopedia is for general reference in a household—how valuable it is for children when they are writing essays and things."

"Are you going to engage me for an encyclopedia?"

He smiled.

"You're in a hurry, Miss——"

"Brettan. Am I in too much of a hurry?"

"Well, you have to be patient, you know, with possible subscribers. If *you* rush, *they* will, too, and the easiest reply to give in a hurry is 'No.' I'm not sure about sending you out with the *Ency.*; after a while, perhaps! How would you

like trying a new work that has never been canvassed, for a beginning?"

"Would it be better?"

"Yes; there's less in it to learn, and you needn't be afraid of hearing, 'Oh, I have one already!'"

"I didn't think of that. What is it, Mr. Collins?"

He touched a bell, and told the boy to bring in a specimen of the *Album*.

"Four half-volumes at twelve and sixpence each," he said, turning to her, "*The Album of Inventions*. It gives the history of all the principal inventions, with a brief biography of the inventors. You want to know who invented the watch—look it up under W; the telephone—turn to T. It's a history of the progress of science and civilisation. 'The origin of the inventions, and the voids they fill,' that's the idea. Ah, here it is! Now look at that, and tell me if you think you could do any good with it."

She took a slim crimson-bound book from its case, and glanced through it.

"Oh, I certainly think I could," she said; "I should like to try, anyhow."

"Very well, you shall be the first agent to canvass the *Album* for us."

"And how about terms?" she questioned.

"The terms, Miss Brettan, ought to be to you in a very little while about five or six pounds a week. You may do more; we have travellers with us who are making their twenty. But for a start say five or six."

"You mean that that would be my commencing salary?" she asked calmly.

"No, not as salary," he said, carelessly too. "I mean your commissions would amount to that." By his tone one might have supposed that formality obliged him to distinguish between these sources of income, but that it was practically a distinction without a difference. "On every order you bring us for the *Album* we allow you half a guinea. Saturdays you needn't go out—it's a bad day, especially to catch professional men. But saying you make twelve calls five days a week, and out of every dozen calls you book two orders, there is your five guineas a week for you as regular as clockwork! I'll tell you what I'll do: just give me a receipt for the specimen, and go home this morning and study it. To-morrow come in to me again at ten o'clock. And every day I'll make out a short list for you of people who've already been subscribers of ours for some work or another—I can pick out addresses that lie close together; and then you'll have the advantage of knowing

you're waiting on buyers, and not wasting your time."

"Thank you very much," she said.

"Here's the order-book. You see they have to fill up a form. Every one you bring filled-in means half a guinea to you. You have no further trouble—a deliverer takes the volumes round and collects the money. Just get the order signed, and *your* responsibility is over. Is that all right?"

"That's all right."

He rose and shook hands with her.

"At ten o'clock," he repeated. "So long!"

She descended the dirty stairs excitedly. The aspect of the world had changed for her in a quarter of an hour. And to think she would never have dreamt of trying Pattenden's—never have heard of the occupation—if she had not met Mr. Macpherson, had not gone to Finchley, had not been so tired that, having parted with her last penny at the news-room——

The remembrance of her present penury rushed back to her. With five guineas a week coming in directly, she had no money to go on with in the meanwhile. To walk about the streets all day, without even a biscuit between the scanty meals at home, would be impossible. She questioned desperately what there remained

to her to pawn—what she was to do. Gaining her room, she eyed her little bag of linen forlornly; she did not think she could borrow anything on articles like these, neither could she spare any of them, nor summon the courage to put them on a counter. Suddenly the inspiration came to her that there was the bag itself. And at dusk she went out with it. This time the pawnbroker omitted to inquire if she had a half-penny; he deducted the cost of the ticket from the amount of the loan. Taking the bull by the horns, she next sought the landlady, and said that she would be unable to pay the impending bill when it came up, but that she would pay that and the next one together.

“I’ve found work,” she said, feeling like a housemaid. “If you wouldn’t mind letting it stand over——”

Mrs. Shuttleworth dried her fingers on her apron, and agreed with less hesitation than her lodger had feared.

Convinced that her specimen was mastered—she had rehearsed two or three little gusts of eulogy which she thought would sound spontaneous—Mary now considered calling on the Macphersons to inform them of the result of their suggestion. Reluctant to intrude, she had

half decided to write, but with her limited means, the stamp was an object, and besides, she was uncertain of the number. She determined on the visit.

The door was opened by Charlotte, and hastily explaining the motive of her call, Mary followed her inside. She found the parlour in a state of confusion, and gathered from the trio in a breath that destiny, in the form of Pilcher's, had ordered that Mr. Macpherson should be torn from his family a week earlier than the severance had been anticipated.

"He's going to Leeds to-morrow," exclaimed the little woman distractedly, oppressed by an armful of shirts that fell from her one by one as she moved; "and it wasn't till this afternoon we heard a word about it. Oh dear! oh dear! how many's that, James?"

"'Tis thirty-three," said the traveller, "an', as ye weel ken, it should be thirty-sax! I canna see the use o' a body havin' thirty-sax shirts if they can never be found."

"I'm afraid I'm in the way," murmured Mary; "I just looked in to say it's all satisfactory, and to tell you how much obliged I am. I won't stop."

"You're not in the way at all. You've got

one on, James: that's thirty-four! My dear, would you mind counting these shirts for me? I declare my head's going round!"

She held the bundle out to Mary feebly, and, dropping on to the traveller's box, watched her with harassed eyes.

"Pa has three dozen of 'em," said Charlotte with pride, "'cos of the trouble of getting 'em washed when he goes about so much. I think, though, you lose 'em on the road, pa."

"It's a silly thought that's like ye," returned her parent shortly. "Young leddy, what dae ye mak' it?"

"There are only thirty-three here," replied Mary, struggling with a laugh, "and—and one is thirty-four!"

"Thirty-three," exclaimed Mr. Macpherson, "and ane is thirty-four! Twa shirts missin', twa shirts at five and saxpence apiece wasted—lost through repreheensible carelessness!" He sat down on the box by his wife's side, and contemplated her severely. "Aweel," he said at last, sociable under difficulties, "an' Collins was agreeable, ye tell me?"

"He was very nice indeed."

"Hoh!" he sighed, "ye will na mak' a penny by it. But the pursuit may serve tae occupy ye!"

"Not make a penny by it?" she ejaculated.

"Don't you mind him," said his partner; "he's got the 'ump, that's what's the matter with him!"

"It may serve tae occupy your mind," repeated Mr. Macpherson funereally; "'tis pleasant walkin' in the fine weather. Now mind ye, 'oman, I dinna leave withoot ma twa shirts. I canna banish them frae ma memory."

"Bless and save us, James, haven't I rummaged every drawer in the place?"

"I am for ever repleenishing that thirty-sax, an' it is for ever short," he complained; "will ye no' look in the keetchen?"

She was absent some time on the quest, and Charlotte questioned Mary about the details of her interview at Messrs. Pattenden's. She said she knew that "Pa had been with them for several years," so the business could not be so unprofitable as he had just pretended. Appealed to for support, however, her pa sighed again, and it was obvious that he was impelled towards an unusually pessimistic view of everything that night. A brief reference to a "sink o' inequity" was accepted as a comment upon the "wine-and-speerit" trade, but he had nothing cheerful to say of books, either; and, recognising the futility of attempting a graceful retreat, the visitor got up abruptly and wished them good-bye. Mrs. Mac-

pherson joined her in the passage, without the shirts.

"Good-night, miss," she murmured; "don't be down in the mouth. Have plenty of cheek, and you'll get along like a house afire! As for me, I'm going back to the kitchen and mean to stop there."

At Mary's third step she called to her to come back.

"Never," she added, "go and settle down with a traveller. You're likely to fetch 'em, but don't do it!" She jerked her head towards the parlour. "A good man, my dear, but his shirts were my cross from our wedding-day!"

Mary assured her that the warning should be borne in mind, and left the little person wiping her brow. The remark about marrying, idle as it was, distressed her. Last night too there had been a mention of the possibility, and, knowing that she could never be any man's wife, the suggestion shook her painfully. How she had wrecked her life, she reflected, and for a man who had cared nothing for her!

The assertion that he cared nothing for her was bitterer to her soul than the knowledge that she had wrecked her life. To have a love despised is always a keener torture to a woman than to a man; for a woman surrenders herself

less easily, thinks the more of what she is bestowing, and counts the treasures at her disposal over and over—ultimately for the sake of delighting in the knowledge of how much she is going to give. If one of the pearls that she has laid so reverently at her master's feet is left to lie there, she exonerates him and accuses herself. But his caresses never quite fill the unsuspected wound. If it happens that he neglects them all, then the woman, beggared and unthanked, wonders why the sun shines, and how people can laugh. Some women can take back a misdirected love, erase the superscription, and address it over again. Others cannot. Mary could not. She had lain in Seaton's arms and kissed him; pride bade her be ashamed of the memory; her heart found food in it. It was all over, all terrible, all a thing that she ought to shiver and revolt at. But the depth of her devotion had been demonstrated by the magnitude of her sin, and she was not able, because the sacrifice had been misprized, to say, "Therefore, in everything except my misery, it shall be as if I had never made it."

She could not, continually as she put its fever from her, wrench the tenderness out of her being, recall her guilt and forget its motive. The sin of her life had been caused by her love, and,

come weal, come woe, come gratitude or callousness, a love that had been responsible for such a thing as that was not a sentiment to be plucked out and destroyed at the dictates of common-sense. It was not a thing that Carew could kill with baseness. She could have looked him in the face and sworn she hated him; she felt that, though that might not be quite true, she could never touch his hand nor sit in a room with him again. But neither her contempt for him nor for her own weakness could blot out the recollection of the hours of passion, the years of communion, when if one of them had said, "I should like," the other had replied, "Say *we* should!"

It was well for her that the exigencies of her situation were supplying anxieties which to a great extent penned her thoughts within more wholesome bounds. On the morrow her chief idea was to distinguish herself on her preliminary expedition. Mr. Collins, true to his promise, had prepared a list for her. The houses were all in the neighbourhood of the Abbey, and mostly, he informed her, the offices of civil engineers. He said civil engineers were a "likely class," the principal objection to them being that they were "so beastly irregular in their movements." When she had "worked Westminster," he added,

he would start her among barristers and clergymen.

"Come in, when you've done, and tell me how you've got on," he said pleasantly. "I suppose you haven't a pocket large enough to hold your specimen? Never mind! Keep it out of sight as much as you can when you ask for people; and ask for them as if you were going to give them a commission to build a bridge."

She smiled confidently; and, allaying the qualms of peddlery with the balm of prospective riches, on which she could advertise for other employment should this prove very uncongenial, she proceeded to the office marked "1."

It was in Victoria Street, and the name of the gentleman upon whom she was to intrude was painted, among a string of others, on a black board at the entrance. She paused and inspected this board longer than was necessary, so long that a porter in livery asked her whom she wanted. She told him, "Mr. Gregory Hatch"; to which he replied, "Third floor," evidently with the supposition that she would make use of the lift. She profited by this supposition of his, and felt an impostor to begin with. The name of "Gregory Hatch," with initials after it which conveyed no meaning to her, confronted her on a

door as the lift stopped; and with a further decrease of ardour, she walked quickly in.

There were several consequential young men acting as clerks behind a stretch of mahogany, and, perceiving her, one of these lordly beings lounged forward, and descended from his high estate sufficiently to inquire, "What can I do for yer?" His bored and haughty glance took in the specimen.

"Is Mr. Hatch in?"

"I'll see," drawled the youth; he looked suspiciously at the specimen now, and it began to be cumbersome.

"Er, what name?"

"Miss Brettan."

He strolled into the apartment marked "Private," and a sickening certainty that, if she were admitted to it, the youth would be summoned directly afterwards to eject her, made her yearn to take flight before he reappeared. She was debating what excuse for a hurried departure she could offer, when the door was re-opened and he requested her to "step in, please."

An old gentleman of preoccupied aspect was busy at a desk; he and she were alone in the room.

"Miss—Brettan?" he said interrogatively. "Take a chair, madam."

He put his papers down, and waited, she was convinced, for his commission for a bridge. She took the seat that he had indicated, because she was too much embarrassed to decline it, and she immediately felt that this was going to be regarded as an additional piece of impertinence.

"I have called," she stammered—in her rehearsals she had never practised an introductory speech, and she abominated herself for the omission—"I have called, Mr.——" his name had suddenly sailed away from her—"with regard to a book I've been asked to show you by Messrs. Pattenden. If you'll allow me——"

She drew the specimen from the case and put it on the desk before him.

She was relieved to find him much less astonished than she had anticipated. He even fingered the thing tentatively, and she began to collect her wits. To take it into her hands, however, and expatiate on its merits leaf by leaf, was beyond her. She soothed her conscience by remarking it was a very nice book, really.

"It seems so," said the old gentleman. "*The Album of Inventions*, dear me! A new work?"

"Oh yes," she said, "new. It's quite new, it's quite a new work." She felt idiotic to keep repeating how new it was, but she could not think of anything else to say.

"Dear me," said the old gentleman again. He appeared to be growing interested by the examination, and it looked within the regions of possibility that he might give an order. Up to that moment all her ambition had been to find herself in the street again without having been abused.

"The beauty of the work is," she said, "er—that it is so pithy. One so often wants to know something that one has forgotten about something: who thought of it, and how the other people managed before he did. I'm sure, Mr. Pattenden, that if you——"

"Hatch, madam—my name is Hatch!"

"I beg your pardon," she said—"I meant to say 'Mr. Hatch.' I was going to say that, if you care to take a copy of it, it is very cheap."

"And what may the price be?" he asked.

"It is in four volumes at twelve and sixpence," said Mary melodiously.

"The four?"

"Oh no—each! Thick volumes they are; do you think it's dear?"

"No," he said; "oh no!—a very valuable book, I've no doubt."

"Then perhaps you will give me an order for it?" she inquired, scarcely able to contain her elation.

"No," he said, still persuing an article, "I will not give an order for it; I have so many books."

She stared at him in blank disappointment while he read placidly to the end of a page.

"There," he said benevolently; "a capital work! It deserves to sell largely; the publishers should be hopeful of it. The plates are bold, and the matter seems to me of a high degree of excellence. The fault I usually condemn in such illustrations is the mistake of making 'pictures' of them, to the detriment of their usefulness; clearness is always the grand desideratum in an illustration of a mechanical contrivance. With this, the customary blunder has been avoided; in looking through the specimen I've scarcely detected one instance where I would suggest an alteration. And, though I wouldn't promise"—he laughed good-humouredly—"but what on a more careful inspection I might be forced to temper praise with blame, I'm inclined, on the whole, to give the book my hearty commendation."

"But will you buy it?" demanded Miss Brettan.

"No," said the old gentleman, "thank you; I never buy books—I have so many. No trouble at all; I am very pleased to have seen it. Allow me!"

He bowed her out with genial ceremony, and seemed to be under the impression that he had conferred a favour.

The next gentleman that she wanted to see was dead. Number 3 had gone on a trial-trip; and two other gentlemen were out of town. Number 6, on reference to her paper, proved to be a "Mr. Crespigny." His outer office much resembled that of Mr. Hatch, and more supercilious young men were busy behind a counter.

She waited while her name was taken in to him. On Mr. Collin's theory, this, the sixth venture, ought to result in half a guinea to her. She had by now arranged a little overture, and was ready to introduce herself in coherent phrases. Instead of her being admitted to the inner room, however, Mr. Crespigny came out, in the wake of his clerk, and it devolved upon her to explain her business publicly. He was a tall man with a pointed beard, and he advanced towards her in interrogative silence, flicking a cigarette. Her heart was thudding.

"Good-morning," she said; "Messrs. Patten-den, the publishers, have asked me to wait upon you with a specimen of a new work that——"

Mr. Crespigny deliberately turned his back, and walked to the threshold of the private office

without a word. Regaining it, he spoke to the hapless clerk.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, "don't you know a book-agent yet when you see one?"

He slammed the door behind him, and, with a sensation akin to having been slapped in the face, she hurried away. Her cheeks were hot; no retort occurred to her even when she stood on the pavement. She *was* a book-agent, a pest whose intrusion was always liable to be ridiculed or resented according to the bent of the person importuned. Oh, how hateful it was to be poor—"poor" in the fullest meaning of the term; to be compelled to cringe to cads, and swallow insults, and call it "wisdom" that one showed no spirit! An hour passed before she could nerve herself to make another attempt; Mr. Crespigny had taken all the pluck out of her. And when she repaired to Pattenden's her report was a chronicle of failures.

The exact answers obtained she had in many cases forgotten, and Mr. Collins advised her to jot down brief memoranda of the interviews in future, that he might be able to point out to her where her line of conduct had been at fault.

"Now, that set speech of yours was a mistake," he said. "What you want to do at the start is to

get the man's attention—to surprise him into listening. Perhaps he has had half a dozen travellers bothering him already, all trying for an order for something or another, and all beginning the same way. Go in brightly. Don't let him know your business till you've got the specimen open under his nose. Cry, 'Well, Mr. So-and-So, here it is, out at last!' Say anything that comes into your head, but startle him at the beginning. He may think you're mad, but he'll listen from astonishment, and when you've woke him up you can show him that you're not."

"It's so awful," she said dejectedly.

"Awful?" exclaimed Mr. Collins. "Do you know the great Napoleon was a book-agent? Do you know that when he was a lieutenant without a red cent he travelled with a work called *L'Histoire de la Révolution*? My dear young lady, if you go to Paris you can see his canvasser's outfit under a glass case in the Louvre, and the list of orders he succeeded in collaring!"

"I don't suppose he liked it."

"He liked the money it brought in; and you'll like yours directly. You don't imagine I expected you to do any good right off? I should have been much surprised if you'd come in with any different account this afternoon, I can tell you! No, no, you mustn't be disheartened be-

cause you aren't lucky at the start; and as to that Victoria Street fellow who was in a bad temper, what of him? He has to make his living, and you have to make yours; remember you're just as much in your rights as the man you're talking to when you make a call anywhere."

"Very good," said Mary; "if you are satisfied, *I* am. I don't pretend my services are being clamoured for. You may be sure I want to do well with the thing. If, by putting my pride in my pocket, I can put an income there too, I'm ready to do it."

It became a regular feature of her afternoon visit at the publishers' for Mr. Collins to encourage her with prophecies of good fortune; and her anxiety was frequently assuaged by his consideration. On the first few occasions when she returned with her notes of "Out; Out; Doesn't need it; Never reads; Too busy to look," etc., she dreaded the additional chagrin of being rebuked for incompetence; but Mr. Collins was always complaisant, and perpetually assured her that she was enduring only the disappointments inevitable to a beginner. In his own mind he began to doubt her fitness for the occupation, but he liked her, and knowing that, in the trade phrase, some orders "booked themselves," he was

willing to afford her the chance of making a trifle as long as she desired to avail herself of it. They were terrible days to Mary Brettan, wearing away without result, while her pitiful store of cash grew less and less; and since each day was so drearily long, it was amazing that a week passed so quickly. This is an anomaly especially conspicuous to lodgers, and when her bill was due again she beheld her landlady with despair.

"Mrs. Shuttleworth," she said, "I have done nothing; I hoped to pay you, and I can't. I'm not a cheat, though it looks like it; I am agent for a firm of publishers, and I haven't earned a single commission." Mrs. Shuttleworth scrutinised her grimly, and she held her breath. She might be commanded to leave, and as omnibus fares were an item of her expenditure now, no more than a shilling remained of the sum raised on the handbag. "What do you say?" she faltered.

"Well," said the other, "it's like this: I'm not 'ard and I don't say as I'd care to go and turn a respectable girl into the streets, for I know what I'd be doing. But I can't afford to lay out for your breakfas' and your tea with never a farthing coming back for it. Keep the room a bit,

and the rent can wait; but I must ask you to get all your meals outside till we're straight again."

A lodger on sufferance; left with nothing to pawn, and possessed of a shilling to sustain life till she gained an order for *The Album of Inventions*, Mary toiled up staircases with the specimen. To economise on remaining pounds may be managed with refinement; to be frugal of the last silver is possible with decency; but to be reduced to the depths of pence means a devilish hunger whose cravings cannot be stilled for more than an hour at a time, and a weakness that mounts from limbs to brain till the throat contracts, and the eyeballs ache from exhaustion. However fatigued her fruitless expeditions might have made her now, she went back to the publishing-house enduringly afoot, grudging every half-penny, husbanding the meagre sum with the tenacity of deadly fear. The windows of the foreign restaurants with viands temptingly displayed and tastefully garnished, the windows of the English cook-shops, into which the meats were thrown, enchanted her eye as she would never have believed that food could have the power to do. She understood what starvation was; began to understand how people could be brought to thief by it, and exculpated them

for doing so. Without her clothes becoming abruptly shabby, the aspect of the woman deteriorated from her internal consciousness. She carried herself less confidently; she lost the indefinable air that distinguishes the freight from the flotsam on the sea of life. Little things sent the fact home to her. Drivers ceased to lift an inquiring forefinger when she passed a cab-rank, and once, when an address on her list proved to be a private house, the servant asked her "Who from?" instead of "What name?"

Inch by inch she fought for the ground that was slipping under her, affecting cheerfulness when the specimen was exhibited, and hiding desperation when she restored it, a failure, to its case. The sight of Victoria Street and its neighbourhood came to be loathsome to her. Often her instructions took her on to different floors of the same building day after day; and, fancying that the hall-porters divined why she reappeared so often, she entered with the misgiving that they might forbid her to ascend.

It was no shock to her at last to issue from the lodging beggared. She had felt so long that the situation was inevitable that she accepted its coming almost apathetically. She faced the usual day, mounting the flights of stairs, and drooping down them, a shade the weaker for the

absence of the pitiful breakfast. It was not until one o'clock that the hopelessness of routine was admitted. Then, the prospect of the journey to reach her room again was intimidating enough; she did not even return to Pattenden's; she went slowly back and lay down on the bed, managing to forget her hunger intermittently in snatches of sleep.

Towards evening the pangs faded altogether. But incidents of years ago recurred to her without any effort of the will, impelling her to cry feebly at the recollection of some unkind answer that she had once given, at a hurt expression that she saw again on her father's face. During the night her troubles were reflected in her dreams, and at morning she woke hollow-eyed.

It was labour to her to dress. But she did not feel hungry, she felt only dazed. She drank a glassful of water from the bottle on the wash-hand-stand, and, driven to exertion by necessity, took her way to the publishers', moving among the crowd torpidly, not acutely conscious of her surroundings.

Mr. Collins exclaimed at her appearance and strongly advised her to go home and rest.

"You don't look the thing at all," he said with genuine concern. "Stay indoors to-day; you won't do any good if you're not well."

She smiled wistfully at his idea that staying indoors would improve matters.

"I shan't be any better for not going out," she said. "Yes, give me the list. Only don't expect me to come in and report; I shan't feel much like doing that."

He wrote a few names for her.

"I shan't give you many to-day," he said. "Here are half a dozen; try these!"

"Thank you," said Mary; "I'll try these."

She went down, and out into the street once more. The rattle of the traffic roared in her ears; the jam and jostle of the pavements confused her. She felt like a child buffeted by giants, and could have lifted her arms, wailing to God to let the end be now—to let her die quickly and quietly, and without much pain.

CHAPTER V

ON the third floor of a house in Delahay Street there used to be a room which was at once sitting-room and "workshop." A blue plate here and there over the mirror, the shabby arm-chair on the hearth, and a modest collection of books on the wall, gave it an air of home. The long white table, littered with plans and paints, before the window, and a theodolite in the corner, showed that it served for office too.

A man familiar with that interior had just entered the passage, and as he began to ascend the stairs a smile of anticipated welcome softened the rigidity of his face. He was a tall, loosely-built man, who was generally credited with five more years than the two-and-thirty he had really seen; a man who, a physiognomist would have asserted, formed few friendships and was a stanch friend. Possibly it was the gauntness of the face that caused him to appear older than he was, possibly its gravity. He did not look as if he laughed readily, as if he saw much in life to laugh at. He did not look impulsive, or emotional, or a man to be imagined singing a song.

He could be pictured the one cool figure in a scene of panic with greater facility than participating in the enthusiasm of a grand-stand. Not that you found his aspect heroic, but that you could not conceive him excited.

He turned the handle as he knocked at the door, and strode into the room without awaiting a response. The occupant dropped his T-square with a clatter, giving a quick halloa:

"Philip! Dear old chap!"

Dr. Kincaid gripped the outstretched hand. "How are you?" he said.

Walter Corri pushed him into the shabby chair, and lounged against the mantelpiece, smiling down at him.

"How are you?" repeated Dr. Kincaid.

"All right. When did you come up?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Going to stay long?"

"Only a day or two."

"Pipe?"

"Got a cigar; try one!"

"Thanks."

Corri pulled out a chair for himself. "Well, what's the news?" he said.

"Nothing particular; anything fresh with you?"

"No. How's your mother?"

"Tolerably well; she came up with me."

"Did she! Where are you?"

"Some little hotel. I'm charged with a lot of messages——"

"That you don't remember!"

"I remember one of them: you're to come and see her."

"Thanks, I shall."

"Come and dine to-night, if you've nothing on. We have a room to ourselves, and——"

"I'd like to. What are you going to do during the day?"

"There are two or three things that won't take very long, but I was obliged to come. What are *you* doing?"

"I've an appointment outside at twelve; I shall be back in about an hour, and then I could stick a paper on the door without risking an independence."

"You can go about with me?"

"If you'll wait."

"Good! Where do you keep your matches?"

"Matches are luxuries. Tear up *The Times*!"

"Corri's economy! Throw me *The Times*, then!"

Kincaid lit his cigar to his satisfaction, and stretched his long legs before the fire. Both men puffed placidly.

"Well," said Corri, "and how's the hospital? How do you like it?"

"My mother doesn't like it; she finds it so lonely at home by herself. I thought she'd get used to it in a couple of months—I go round to her as often as I can—but she complains as much as she did at the beginning. She's taken up the original idea again, and of course it *is* dull for her. And she's not strong, either."

"No, I know."

"Tell her I'm going to be a successful man by-and-by, Wally, and cheer her up. It enlivens her to believe it."

"I always do."

"I know you do; whenever she's seen you, she looks at me proudly for a week and tells me what a 'charming young man' Mr. Corri is—'how clever!' The other fault she finds with you is that you haven't got married."

"Tell her that I have what the novelists call an 'ideal.'"

"When did you catch it?"

"Last year. A fellow I know married the 'Baby'—an adoring daughter that thought all her family unique."

"And——?"

"My ideal is the blessing who is still unappropriated at twenty-eight. She'll have discovered

by then that her mother isn't infallible; that her brothers aren't the first living authorities on wines, the fine arts, horseflesh, and the sciences; and that the 'happy home' isn't incapable of improvement. In fact, she'll have got a little tired of it."

"You've the wisdom of a relieved widower."

"I have seen," said Corri widely. "The fellow, you know! Married fellows are an awfully 'liberal education.' This one has been turned into a nurse—among the several penalties of his selection. The treasure is for ever dancing on to wet pavements in thin shoes and sandwiching imbecilities between colds on the chest. He swears you may move the Himalayas sooner than teach a girl of twenty to take care of herself. He told me so with tears in his eyes. I mean to be older than my wife, and she has got to be twenty-eight, so it's necessary to wait a few years. I may be able to support her, too, by then; that's another thing in favour of delay."

"I'll represent the matter in the proper light for you on the next occasion."

"Do; it's extraordinary that every woman advocates matrimony for every man excepting her own son."

"She makes up for it by her efforts on behalf of her own daughter."

"Is that from experience?"

"Not in the sense you mean; I'm no catch to be chased myself; but I've seen enough to make you sick. The friends see the ceremonies—I see the sequels."

"'There are worse occupations in this world than feeling a woman's pulse.' But Yorick was an amateur! I should say a horrid profession, in one way; it can't leave a scrap of illusion. What's a complexion to a man who knows all that's going on underneath? I suppose when a girl gives a blush you see a sort of chart of her muscles and remember what produces it."

"I knew a physician who used to say he had never cared for any woman who hadn't a fatal disease," replied Kincaid; "how does that go with your theory? She was generally consumptive, I believe."

"Do you understand it?"

"Pity, I dare say, first. Doctors are men."

"Yes, I suppose they are; but somehow one doesn't think of them that way. Between the student and the doctor there's such an enormous gap. It's a stupid idea, but one feels that a doctor marries, as he goes to church on Sunday—because the performance is respectable and expected. Some professions don't make any difference to the man himself; you don't think of

an engineer as being different from anybody else; but with Medicine——”

“It’s true,” said Kincaid, “that hardly anybody but a doctor can realise how a doctor feels; his friends don’t know. The only writer who ever drew one was George Eliot.”

“If you’re a typical——”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about myself; don’t take me! When a man’s thoughts mean worries, he acquires the habit of keeping them to himself very soon; that is, if he isn’t a fool. It isn’t calculated to make him popular, but it prevents him becoming a bore.”

“Out comes your old bugbear! Isn’t it possible for you to believe a man’s pals may listen to his worries without being bored?”

“How many times?”

“Oh, damn, whenever they’re there!”

“No,” said Kincaid meditatively, “it isn’t. They’d hide the boredom, of course, but he ought to hide the worries. Let a man do his cursing in soliloquies, and grin when it’s conversation.”

“Would it be convenient to mention exactly what you do find it possible to believe in?”

“In work, and grit, and Walter Corri. In doing your honest best in the profession you’ve chosen for the sake of the profession, not in the hope of what it’s going to do for you. You can’t,

quite—that's the devil of it! Your own private ambitions *will* obtrude themselves sometimes; but they're only vanity, when all's said and done—just meant for the fuel. What does nine out of ten men's success do for anyone but the nine men? Leaving out the great truths, the discoveries that benefit the human race for all time, what more good does a man effect in his success than he did in his obscurity? Who wants to see him succeed, excepting perhaps his mother—who's dead before he does it? Who's the better for his success? who does he think will be any better off for it? Nobody but No. 1! Then, whenever the vanity's sore and rubbed the wrong way, you'd have him go to his friends and take it out of them. What a selfish beast!"

"Bosh!" said Corri. "Oh, I know it isn't argument, but 'bosh'!"

"My dear fellow——"

"My dear fellow, you had a rough time of it yourself for any number of years, and——"

"And they've left their mark. Very naturally! What then?"

"Simply that now you want to stunt all humanity in the unfortunate mould that was clapped on *you*. You understand the right of every pain to shriek excepting mental pain. You'd sit up all night pitying the whimpers of a

child with a splintered finger, but if a man made a moan because his heart was broken, you'd call him a 'selfish beast'!"

Kincaid ejected a circlet of smoke, and watched it sail away before he answered.

"‘Weak,’" he said, "I think I should call that ‘weak.’ It was a very good sentence, though, if not quite accurate. This reminds me of old times; it takes me back ten years to sit in your room and have you bully me. There's something in it, Corri; circumstances are responsible for a deuce of a lot, and we're all of us accidents. I'm a bad case, you tell me; I dare say it's true. You're a good chap to put up with me."

"Don't be a fool," said Corri.

The "fool" stared into the coals, nursing his big knee. He seemed to be considering his chum's accusation.

"When I was sixteen," he said, still nursing the knee and contemplating the fire, "I was grown up. In looking back, I never see any transition from childhood to maturity. I was a kid, and then I was a man. I was a man when I went to school; I never had larks out of hours; I went there understanding I was sent to learn as much, and as quickly as I could. Then from school I was put into an office, and was a man who already had to hide what he felt; my people

knew I wanted to make this my profession, and they couldn't afford it. If I had let the poor old governor see—well, he didn't see; I affected contentment, I said a clerkship was 'rather jolly'! Good Lord! I said it was 'jolly'! The abasement of it! The little hypocritical cur it makes of you, that life, where a gape is regarded as a sign of laziness and you're forced to hide the natural thing behind an account-book or the lid of your desk; when the knowledge that you mustn't lay down your pen for five minutes under your chief's eyes teaches you to sneak your leisure when he turns his back, and to sham uninterrupted industry at the sound of his return. With the humbug, and the 'Yes, sirs,' and the 'No, sirs,' you're a schoolboy over again as a clerk, excepting that in an office you're paid."

"My clerk has yet to come!" said Corri, grimacing.

"Yes, he's being demoralised somewhere else. How I thanked God one night when my father told me that he could see his way, if I was still just as keen! The words took me out of hell. But when I did become a student I couldn't help being conscious that to study was an extravagance. The knowledge was with me all the time, reminding me of my responsibility—although it wasn't till the governor died that I knew how

great an extravagance it must have seemed to him. And I never spread with the fellows as a student any more than I had enjoyed myself with the lads in the playground. Altogether, I haven't rollicked, Corri. Such youth as I have had has been snatched at between troubles."

"Poor old beggar!"

Kincaid smiled quickly.

"There's more feeling in 'you poor old beggar!' than in a letter piled up with condolence. It's hard lines one can't write 'poor old beggar' to every acquaintance who has a bereavement." The passion that had crept into his strong voice while speaking of his earlier life to the one person in the world to whom he could have brought himself to speak so, had been repressed; his tone was again the impassive one that was second-nature to him.

"Believe me," he said, harking back after a pause, "that idea of the medical profession, that 'respectable and expected' idea of yours, is quite wrong. Oh, it isn't yours alone, it's common enough; every little comic paragraphist thinks himself justified in turning out a number of ignorant jokes at the profession's expense in the course of the year; every twopenny-halfpenny caricaturist has to thank us for a number of his dinners. No harm's meant, and nobody minds;

but people who actually know something of the subject that these funny men are so constant to can tell you that there's more nobility and self-sacrifice in the medical profession than in any under the sun, not excepting the Church. Yes, and more hardships too! The chat on the weather and the fee for remarking it's a fine day isn't every medical man's life; the difficulty is to get the fees in return for loyal attendance. Nobody's revered like the family doctor in time of sickness. In the days of their child's recovery the parents love the doctor almost as fervently as they do the child; but the fervour's got cold when Christmas comes and the gratitude's forgotten. And they know a doctor can't dun them; so he has to wait for his account and pretend the money's of no consequence when he bows to them, though the butcher and the baker and the grocer don't pretend to *him*, but look for *their* bills to be settled every week. I could give you instances——"

He gave instances. Corri spoke of difficulties, too. They smoked their cigars to the stumps, talking leisurely, until Corri declared that he must go.

"In an hour, then, I'll call back for you," said Kincaid; "you won't be longer?"

"I don't think so. But why not wait? You

can make yourself comfortable; there's plenty of *The Times* left to read."

"I will. I want to write a couple of letters—can I?"

"There's a desk! Have I got everything? Yes, that's all. Well, I'll be as quick as I can, but if I *should* be detained I shall find you here?"

"You'll find me here," said Kincaid, "don't be alarmed."

The other's departure did not send him to the desk immediately, however. Left alone, it was manifest how used the man had been to living alone. It was manifest in his composure, in his deliberation, in the earnestness he devoted to the task when at last he attacked it. He had just reached the foot of the second page when somebody knocked at the door.

"Come in," he said abstractedly.

The knock was repeated. It occurred to him that Corri had omitted to provide for the contingency of a client's calling. "Come in!" he cried more loudly, annoyed at the interruption.

He glanced over his shoulder, and saw that the intruder was a woman, with something in her hand.

"Mr. Corri?"

"Mr. Corri's not in," he replied, fingering the pen; "he'll be back by-and-by."

Mary lingered irresolutely. Her temples throbbed, and in her weakness the sight of a chair magnetised her.

"Shall I wait?" she murmured; "perhaps he won't be very long?"

"Eh?" said Kincaid. "Oh, wait if you like, madam."

She sank into a seat mutely. The response had not sounded encouraging, but it permitted her to rest, and rest was what she yearned for now. How indifferent the world was! how mercilessly little anybody cared for anybody else! "Wait, if you like, madam"—go and die, if you like, madam—go and lay your bones in the gutter, madam, so long as you don't bother me! She watched the big hand hazily as it shifted to and fro across the paper. The man probably had money in his pocket that signified nothing to him, and to her it would have been salvation. He lived in comfort while she was starving; he did not know that she was starving, but how much would it affect him if he did know? She wondered whether she could induce him to give an order for the book; perhaps he was just as likely to order it as the other man? Then she would take a cab back to Mr. Collins and ask him for her commission at once, and go and eat something—if she were able to eat any longer.

She roused herself with an effort, and crossed the room to where he sat.

"I came to see Mr. Corri from Messrs. Patten-den," she faltered, "about a new work they're publishing. I've brought a specimen. If I am not disturbing you——?"

She put it down as she spoke, and stood a pace or two behind him, watching the effect.

"Is this woman very nervous?" said Kincaid to himself. "So she's a book-agent! I thought she had something to sell. Good Lord, what a life!"

"Thanks," he answered. "I'm very busy just now, and I never buy my books on the subscription plan."

"You could have it sent in to you when it's complete," she suggested.

He drummed his fingers on the title-page. "I don't want it."

"Perhaps Mr. Corri——?"

"I can't speak for Mr. Corri; but don't wait for him, on my advice. I'm afraid it would be patience wasted."

He shut the *Album* up, intimating that he had done with it. But the woman made no movement to withdraw it, and he invited this movement by pushing the thing aside. He drew the blotting-pad forward to resume his letter; and

still she did not remove her obnoxious specimen from the desk. He was beginning to feel irritated.

"If you choose to wait, madam, take a seat," he said. . . . "I say take——"

He turned, questioning her continued silence, and sprang to his feet in dismay. The book-agent's head was lolling on her bosom; and his arm—extended to support her—was only out in time to catch her as she fell.

CHAPTER VI

"Now," said Kincaid, when she opened her eyes, "what's the matter with you? No nonsense; I'm a doctor; you mustn't tell lies to me! What's the matter with you?"

There are some things a woman cannot say; this was one of them.

"You're very exhausted?"

"Oh," she said weakly, "I—just a little."

"When had you food last?"

She gave no answer. He scrutinised her persistently, noting her hesitation, and shot his next question straight at the mark.

"Are you hungry?"

The eyes closed again, and her lips quivered.

"Boor!" he said to himself, "she's starving, and you wouldn't buy her book. Beast! she's starving, and you tried to turn her out."

But his sympathy was hardly communicated by his voice; indeed, in her shame she thought him rather rough.

"You stop here a minute," he continued; "don't you go and faint again, because I forbid

it! I'm going to order a prescription for you. Your complaint isn't incurable—I've had it myself."

He left her in quest of the housekeeper, whom he interrogated on the subject of eggs and coffee. A shilling brightened her wits.

"Mr. Corri's room; hurry!"

His patient was sitting in the arm-chair when he went back; he saw tear-stains on her cheek, though she turned away her face at his approach.

"The prescription's being made up," he said. "Would you like the window shut again? No? All right, we'll keep it open. Don't talk if you'd rather not; there's no need—I know all you want to say."

He ignored her ostentatiously till the tray appeared, and then, receiving it at the doorway, brought it over to her himself.

"Come," he said, "try that—slowly."

"Oh!" she murmured, shrinking.

"Don't be silly; do as I tell you! There's nothing to be bashful about; I know you're not an angel—your having an appetite doesn't astonish me."

"How good you are!" she muttered; "what must you think of me?"

"Eat," commanded Kincaid; "ask me what I think of you afterwards."

She was evidently in no danger of committing the mistake that he had looked for—his difficulty was, not to restrain, but to persuade her; nor was her reluctance the outcome of embarrassment alone.

“It has gone,” she said, shaking her head; “I am really not hungry now.”

He encouraged her till she began. Then he retired behind the newspaper, to distress her as little as might be by his presence. At the end of a quarter of an hour he put *The Times* down. The eggshells were empty, and he stretched himself and addressed her:

“Better?”

“Much better,” she said, with a ghost of a smile.

“Have you been having a long experience of this sort of thing?”

“N—no,” she returned nervously, “not very.”

He caressed his moustache; she was ceasing to be a patient and becoming a woman, and he didn't quite know what he was to do with her. Somehow, despite her situation, the offer of a sovereign looked as if it would be coarse. Mary divined his dilemma, and made as if to rise.

“Sit down,” he said authoritatively. “When you're well enough to go I'll tell you; till I do, stay where you are!”

She felt that she ought to say something, proffer some explanation, but she was at a loss how to begin. There was a pause. And then:

"Is there any likelihood of this business of yours improving?" inquired Kincaid. "Suppose you were able to hold out—is there anything to look forward to?"

"No," she said; "I don't think there is. I'm afraid I am no use at it."

"Was it an attractive career, that you made the attempt?"

"Not in the least; but it was a chance."

"I see!"

He saw also that she was a gentlewoman fitted for more refined pursuits. How had she reached this pass? he wondered. Would she volunteer the information, or should he ask her? He failed to perceive what assistance he could render if he knew; yet if he did not help her she would go away and die, and he would know that she was going away to die as he let her out.

"I was introduced to the firm by a very old connection of theirs. I couldn't find anything to do, and he fancied that as I was—well, that as I was a lady—it sounds rather odd under the circumstances to speak of being a lady, doesn't it——?"

"I don't see anything odd about it," he said.

"He fancied I might do rather well. But I think it's a drawback, on the contrary. It's not easy to me to decline to take 'No' for an answer; and nobody can do any good at work she's ashamed of."

"But you shouldn't be ashamed," he said; "it's honest enough."

"That's what the manager tells me. Only when a woman has to go into a stranger's office and bother him, and be snubbed for her pains, the honesty doesn't prevent her feeling uncomfortable. You must have found me a nuisance yourself."

"I'm afraid I was rather brusque," he said quickly. "I was busy; I hope I wasn't rude?"

Her colour rose.

"I didn't mean that at all," she stammered; "I shouldn't be very grateful to remind you of it even if you had been!"

"I should have thought a book of that sort would have been tolerably easy to sell. It's a useful work of reference. What's the price?"

"Two pounds ten altogether. It isn't dear, but people won't buy it, all the same."

"Yes, it's got up well," he said, taking it from the desk and turning the leaves. "How many volumes, did you say?"

"Four."

She made a little tentative movement to recover it, but he went on as if the gesture had escaped him.

"If it's not too late I'll change my mind and subscribe for a copy. Put my name down, please, will you?"

She clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

"No," she said, "thank you, I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"You don't want the book, I know you don't. You've fed me and done enough for me already; I won't take your money too; I can't!"

Her bosom began to swell tempestuously. He saw by the widened eyes fixed upon the fire that she was struggling not to cry again.

"There," he said gently, "don't break down! Let's talk about something else."

"Oh!"—she sneaked a tear away—"I'm not used . . . don't think——"

"No, no," he said, "*I* know, *I* understand. Poke it for me, will you? let's have a blaze."

She took the poker up, and prolonged the task a minute while she hung her head.

Remarked Kincaid:

"It's awful to be hard up, isn't it? I've been through all the stages; it's abominable!"

"*You* have?"

"Oh yes; I know all about it. So I don't tell

you that 'money's the least thing.' Only people who have always had enough say that."

"One wants so little in the world to relieve anxiety," she said; "it does seem cruel that so few can get enough for ease."

"What do you mean by 'ease'?"

"Oh, I should call employment 'ease' now."

"Did you ask for more once, then?"

"Yes, I used to be more foolish. 'Experience teaches fools.'"

"No, it doesn't," said Kincaid. "Experience teaches intelligent people; fools go on blundering to the end. 'Once——?' I interrupted you."

"Well, it used to mean a home of my own, and relations to care for me, and money enough to settle the bills without minding if they came to five shillings more than I had expected. It's a beautiful regulation that the less we have, the less we can manage with. But the horse couldn't live on the one straw."

"How did you come to this?" asked Kincaid; "couldn't you get different work before the last straw?"

"If you knew how I tried! I haven't any friends here; that was my difficulty. I wanted a situation as a companion, but I had to give the idea up at last, and it ended in my going to Pattenden's. Don't think they know! I mean,

don't imagine they guess the straits I'm in: that would be unfair. They have been very kind to me."

"You've never been a companion, I suppose?"

"No; but I hoped, for all that. Everything has to be done for the first time; every adept was a novice once."

"That's true, but there are so many adepts in everything to-day that the novices haven't much chance."

"Then how are they to qualify?"

"That's the novices' affair. You can't expect people to pay incompetence when skilled labour is loafing at the street corners."

"I expect nothing," she answered; "my expectations are all dead and buried. We've only a certain capacity for expectation, I think; under favourable conditions it wears well and we say, 'While there's life there's hope'; but when it's strained too much, it gives out."

"And you drift without a fight in you?"

"A woman can't do more than fight till she's beaten."

"She shouldn't acknowledge to being beaten."

"Theory!" she said between her teeth; "the breakfast-tray is fact!"

"What do you reckon is going to become of you?"

"I don't anticipate at all."

"Oh, that's all rubbish! Answer straight!"

"I shall starve, then," she said.

"Sss! You know it?"

"I know it, and I'm resigned to it. If I weren't resigned to it, it would be much harder. There's nothing that can happen to provide for me! there isn't a soul in the world I can—'will,' to be accurate—appeal to for help. You've delayed it a little by your kindness, but you can't prevent its coming. Oh, I've hoped and struggled till I am worn out!" she went on, her voice shaking. "If there were a prospect, I could rouse myself, weak as I am, to reach it; but there isn't a prospect, not the glimmer of a prospect! I'm not cowardly; I'm only rational. I admit what is; I've finished duping myself."

She could express her despair, this woman; she had education and manner. He contemplated her attentively; she interested him.

"You speak like a fatalist, for all that," he said to her.

"I speak like a woman who has reached the lowest rung of destitution and been fed on charity. I—— Oh, don't, *don't* keep forcing me to make a child of myself like this; let me go! Perhaps you're quite right—things'll improve."

"You shall go presently; not yet—not till I say you may."

There was silence between them once more. He lay back, with his hands thrust deep into his trouser-pockets, and his feet crossed, pondering.

"You weren't brought up to anything, of course?" he said abruptly. "Never been trained to anything? You can't do anything, or make anything, that has any market value?"

"I lived at home."

"And now you're helpless! What rot it is! Why didn't your father teach you to use your hands?"

"I think you said you were a doctor?" she returned, lifting her head.

"Eh? Yes, my name is 'Kincaid.'"

"My father was Dr. Anthony Brettan; he never expected his daughter to be in such want."

"You don't say so—your father was one of us? I'm glad to make your acquaintance. Is it 'Miss Brettan'?"

She nodded, warming with an impulse to go further and cry, "Also I have been a nurse: you are a doctor, can't you get me something to do?" But if she did, he would require corroboration, and, in the absence of her certificate, institute inquiries at the hospital; and then the whisper would circulate that "Brettan was no longer

living with her husband"—they would soon ascertain that he had not died—and from that point to the truth would be the veriest step. "Never married at all—the disgrace! Of course, an actor, but fancy *her!*" She could see their faces, the astonishment of their contempt. Narrow circle as it was, it had been her world—she could not do it!

"But surely, Miss Brettan," he said, "there must be someone who can serve you a little—someone who can put you in the way of an occupation?"

Immediately she regretted having proclaimed so much as she had.

"My father lived very quietly, and socially he was hardly a popular man. For several reasons I wouldn't like my distress to be talked about by people who knew him."

"Those people are your credentials, though," he urged; "you can't afford to turn your back on them. If you'll be guided by advice, you will swallow your pride."

"I couldn't; I made the resolve to stand alone, and I shall stick to it. Besides, you are wrong in supposing that any one of them would exert himself for me to any extent; my father did not have—was not intimate enough with anybody."

A difficult woman to aid, thought Kincaid

pityingly. A notion had flashed across his mind, at her reference to the kind of employment she had desired, and the announcement of her parentage was strengthening it; but there must be something to go upon, something more than mere assertion.

"If a post turned up, who is there to speak for you?"

"Messrs. Pattenden; I believe they'd speak for me willingly."

"Anybody else?"

"No; but the manager would see anyone who went to him about me, I'm almost sure."

"You need friends, you know," he said; "you're very awkwardly placed without any."

"Oh, I do know! To have no friends is a crime; one's helpless without them. And a woman's helplessness is the best of reasons why no help should be extended to her. But it sounds a merciless argument, doctor—horribly merciless, at the beginning!"

"It's a merciless life. Look here, Miss Brettan, I don't want to beat about the bush: you're in a beastly hole, and if I can pull you out of it I shall be glad—for your own sake, and for the sake of your dead father. It's like this, though; the only thing I can see my way to involves the comfort of someone else. You were talking

about a place as companion; I can't live at home now, and my mother wants one."

"Doctor!"

She caught her breath.

"If I were to take the responsibility of recommending you, it's probable she'd engage you; I think you'd suit her, but—— Well, it's rather a large order!"

"Oh, you should never be sorry!" she cried. "You shall never be sorry for trusting me, if you will!"

"You see, it's not easy. It's not usual to go engaging a lady one meets for the first time."

"Why, you wouldn't meet anybody else oftener," she pleaded eagerly; "if you advertised, you'd take the woman after the one interview. You wouldn't exchange a lot of visits and get friendly before you engaged her."

He pulled at his moustache again.

"But of course she wouldn't—wouldn't be starving," she added; "she wouldn't have fainted in your room. It'd be no more judicious, but it would be more conventional."

"You argue neatly," he said with a smile.

The smile encouraged her. She smiled response. He could not smile if he were going to refuse her, she felt.

"Dr. Kincaid——"

"One minute," he said; "I hear someone coming, I think. Excuse me!"

It was Corri; he met him as he turned the handle, and drew him outside.

"There's a woman in there," he said, "and a breakfast-tray. Come down on to the next landing; I want to speak to you."

"What on earth——" said Corri. "Are you giving a party? What do you mean by a woman and a breakfast-tray? Did the woman bring the breakfast-tray?"

"No, she brought a book. It's serious."

They leant over the banisters conferring, while Mary, in the arm-chair, remained trembling with suspense. The vista opened by Kincaid's words had shown her how tenaciously she still clung to life, how passionately she would clutch at a chance of prolonging it. Awhile ago her one prayer had been to die speedily; now, with a possibility of rescue dangled before her eyes, her prayer was only for the possibility to be fulfilled. Would he be satisfied, or would he send her away? Her fate swung on the decision. She did not marvel at the tenacity; it seemed to her so natural that she did not question it at all. Yet it is of all things the oddest—the love of living which the most life-worn preserve in their hearts. Every day they long for sleep, and daily the

thought of death alarms them—terrifies their inconsistent souls, though few indeed believe there is a Hell, and everybody who is good enough to believe in Heaven believes also that he is good enough to go to it.

“O God,” she whispered, “make him take me! Forgive me what I did; don’t let me suffer any more, God! You know how I loved him—how I loved him!”

“Well,” said Corri, on the landing, “and what are you going to do?”

“I’m thinking,” said Kincaid, “of letting my mother go to see her.”

“It’s wildly philanthropic, isn’t it?”

“It looks wild, of course.” He mused a moment. “But, after all, one knows where she comes from; her father was a professional man; she’s a lady.”

“What was her father’s name, again?”

“Brettan—Anthony.”

“Ever heard it before?”

“If there wasn’t such a person, one can find it out in five minutes. Besides, my mother would have to decide for herself. I should tell her all about it, and if an interview left her content, why——”

“Well,” said Corri, “go back to the Bench and sum up! You’ll find me on the bed. By the

way, if you could hand my pipe out without offending the young lady, I should take it as a favour."

"You've smoked enough. Wait! here's a last cigar; go and console yourself with that!"

Kincaid returned to the room; but he was not prepared to sum up at the moment. Mary looked at him anxiously, striving to divine, by his expression, the result of the consultation on the stairs. The person consulted had been Mr. Corri, she concluded, the man that she had been sent to importune. Old or young? easy-going or morose? On which side had he cast the weight of his opinion—this man that she had never seen?

"We were talking about the companion's place, Miss Brettan," began Kincaid. "Now, what do you say?"

Instantly she glowed with gratitude towards the unknown personage, who, in reality, had done nothing.

"Never should you regret it, Dr. Kincaid, never!"

"Understand, I couldn't guarantee the engagement in any case," he said hastily. "The most I could do would be to mention the matter; the rest would depend on my mother's own feelings."

"I should be just as thankful to you if she objected. Don't think I under-estimate my drawbacks—I know that for you even to consider engaging me is generous. But—— Oh, I'd do my best!—I would indeed! The difficulty's as clear to me as to you," she went on rapidly, "I see it every bit as plainly. See it? It has barred me from employment again and again! I'm a stranger, I've no credentials; I can only look you in the face and say: 'I have told you the truth; if I were able to take your advice and pocket my pride, I could *prove* that I have told you the truth.' And what's that?—anybody might say it and be lying! Oh yes, I know! Doctor, my lack of references has made me suspected till I could have cried blood. Doors have been shut against me, not because I was ineligible in myself, but because I was a woman who hadn't had employers to say, 'I found her a satisfactory person.' Things I should have done for have been given to other women because they had 'characters,' and I hadn't. At the beginning I thought my tones would carry conviction—I thought I could say: 'Honestly, this tale is true,' and someone—one in a dozen, perhaps, one in twenty—would be found to believe me. What a mistake, to hope to be believed! Why, in all London, there's no creature so for-

saken as a gentleman's daughter without friends. A servant may be taken on trust; an educated woman, never!"

"She may sometimes," said Kincaid. "Hang it! it isn't so bad as all that. What *I* can do for you I will! Very likely my mother will call on you this afternoon. Where are you staying?"

A hansom had just discharged a fare at one of the opposite houses, and he hailed it from the window.

"The best thing you can do now is to go home and rest, and try not to worry. Cheer up, and hope for the best, Miss Brettan—care killed a cat!"

She swallowed convulsively.

"That is the address," she said. "God bless you, Dr. Kincaid!"

He led the way down to the passage, and put her into the cab. It was, perhaps, superfluous to show her that he remembered that cabs were beyond her means; yet she might be harassed during the drive by a dread of the man's demand, and he paid him so that she should see.

The occurrence had swelled his catalogue of calls. He told Corri they had better drop in at Guy's, and glance at a medical directory; but in passing a second-hand bookstall they noticed an old copy exposed for sale, and examined that

one. He found Anthony Brettan's name in the provincial section with gladness, and remarked, moreover, that Brettan had been a student of his own college.

" 'Brettan' is going up!" he observed cheerfully. "Now step it, my son!"

Mary's arrival at the lodging was an event of local interest. Mrs. Shuttleworth, who stood at the door conversing with a neighbour, watched her descent agape. Two children playing on the pavement suspended their game. She told Mrs. Shuttleworth that a lady might ask for her during the day, and, mounting to the garret, shut herself in to wrestle unsuccessfully with her fears of being refused, or forgotten altogether. Would this mother come or not? If not—she shivered; she had been so near to ignominious death that the smell of it had reached her nostrils—if not, the devilish gnawing would be back again directly, and the faint sick craving would follow it; and then there would be a fading of consciousness for the last time, and they would talk about her as "it" and be afraid.

But the mother did come. It seemed so wonderful that, even when she sat beside her in the attic, and everything was progressing favourably, Mary could scarcely realise that it was true. She came, and the engagement was made.

There are some women who are essentially women's women; Mary was one of them. Mrs. Kincaid, who came already interested, sure that her Philip could make no mistake and wishful to be satisfied, was charmed with her. The pleading tones, the repose of manner, the—for so she described it later—"Madonna face," if they did not go "straight to her heart," mightily pleased her fancy. And of course Mary liked her; what more natural? She was gentle of voice, she had the softest blue eyes that ever beamed mildly under white hair, and—culminating attraction—she obviously liked Mary.

"I'm a lonely old woman now my son's been appointed medical officer at the hospital," she said. "It'll be very quiet for you, but you'll bear that, won't you? I do think you'll be comfortable with me, and I'm sure I shall want to keep you."

"Quiet for me!" said Mary. "Oh, Mrs. Kincaid, you speak as if you were asking a favour of me, but your son must have told you that—what—— I suppose he saved my life!"

"That's his profession," answered the old lady brightly; "that's what he had to learn to do."

"Ah, but not with hot breakfasts," Mary smiled. "I accept your offer gratefully; I'll come as soon as you like."

"Can you manage to go back with us the day after to-morrow? Don't if it inconveniences you; but if you can be ready——"

"I can; I shall be quite ready."

"Good girl!" said Mrs. Kincaid. "Now you must let me advance you a small sum, or—I daresay you have things to get—perhaps we had better make it this! There, there! it's your own money, not a present; there's nothing to thank me for. Good-afternoon, Miss Brettan; I will write letting you know the train."

"This" was a five-pound note. When she was alone again Mary picked it up, and smoothed it out, and quivered at the crackle. These heavenly people! their tenderness, their consideration! Oh, how beautiful it would be if they knew all about her and there were no reservations! She did wish she could have revealed all to them—they had been so nice and kind.

She sought the landlady and paid her debt—the delight she felt in paying her debt!—and said that she would be giving up her room after the next night. She went forth to a little foreign restaurant in Gray's Inn Road, where she dined wholesomely and well, treating herself to cutlets, bread-crumbed and brown, and bordered with tomatoes, to pudding and gruyère, and a cup of black coffee, all for eighteenpence, after tipping

the waiter. She returned to the attic—glorified attic! it would never appal her any more—and abandoned herself to meditating upon the “things.” There was this, and there was that, and there was the other. Yes, and she must have a box! She would have had her initials painted on the box, only the paint would look so curiously new. Should she have her initials on it? No, she decided that she would not. Then there were her watch, and the bag to be redeemed at the pawnbroker’s, and she must say good-bye to Mr. Collins. What a busy day would be the morrow! what a dawn of new hope, new peace, new life! Her anxieties were left behind; before her lay shelter and rest. Yet on a sudden the pleasure faded from her features, and her lips twitched painfully.

“Tony!” she murmured.

She stood still where she had risen. A sob, a second sob, a torrent of tears. She was on her knees beside the bed, gasping, shuddering, crying out on God and him:

“O Tony, Tony, Tony!”

CHAPTER VII

THE sun shone bright when she met Mrs. Kincaid at Euston. The doctor was there, lounging loose-limbed and bony, by his mother's side. He shook Mary's hand and remarked that it was a nice day for travelling. She had been intending to say something grateful on greeting him, but his manner did not invite it, so she tried to throw her thanks into a look instead. She suffered at first from slight embarrassment, not knowing if she should take her own ticket, nor what assistance was expected of a companion at a railway-station. Perhaps she ought to select the compartment, and superintend the labelling of the luggage? Fortunately the luggage was not heavy, her own being by far the larger portion; and the tickets, she learnt directly, he had already got.

Her employer lived in Westport, a town that Mary had never visited, and a little conversation arose from her questions about it. She did not say much—she spoke very diffidently, in fact; the consciousness that she was being paid to talk

and be entertaining weighted her tongue. She was relieved when, shortly after they started, Mrs. Kincaid imitated her son's example, who lay back in his corner with his face hidden behind *The Lancet*.

They travelled second class, and it was not till a stoppage occurred at some junction that their privacy was invaded. Then a large woman, oppressed by packages and baskets, entered; and, as the new-comer belonged to the category of persons who regard a railway journey as a heaven-sent opportunity to eat an extra meal, her feats with sandwiches had a fascination that rivalled the interest of the landscape.

Of course, three hours later, when the train reached Westport, Mary felt elated. Of course she gazed eagerly from the platform over the prospect. It was new and pleasant and refreshing. There was a little winding road with white palings, and a cottage with a red roof. A bell tolled softly across the meadows, and somebody standing near her said he supposed "that was for five o'clock service." To have exchanged the jostle of London for a place where people had time to remember service on a week-day, to be able to catch the chirp of the birds between the roll of the wheels, was immediately exhilarating. Then, too, as they drove to the house she

scented in the air the freshness of tar that bespoke proximity to the sea. Her bosom lifted. "The blessed peace of it all!" she thought; "how happy I ought to be!"

But she was not happy. That first evening there came to her the soreness and sickness of recollection. She was left alone with Mrs. Kincaid, and in the twilight they sat in the pretty little parlour, chatting fitfully. How different was this arrival from those that she was used to! No unpacking of photographs; no landlady to chatter of the doings of last week's company; no stroll after tea with Tony just to see where the theatre was. How funny! She said "how funny!" but presently she meant "how painful!" And then it came upon her as a shock that the old life was going on still without her. Photographs were still being unpacked and set forth on mantelpieces; landladies still waxed garrulous of last week's business; Tony was still strolling about the towns on Sunday evenings, as he had done when she was with him. And he was going to be Miss Westland's husband, while *she* was here! How hideous, how frightful and unreal, it seemed!

She got up, and went over to the flower-stand in the window.

"Are you tired, Miss Brettan? Perhaps you

would like to go to your room early to-night?"

"No," she said, "thank you; I'm afraid I feel a trifle strange as yet, that's all."

At the opposite corner was a hoarding, and a comic-opera poster shone among the local shopkeepers' advertisements. The sudden sight of theatrical printing was like a welcome to her; she stood looking at it, thrilling at it, with the past alive and warm again in her heart.

"You'll soon feel at home," Mrs. Kincaid said after a pause; "I'm sure I can understand your finding it rather uncomfortable at first."

"Oh, not uncomfortable," Mary explained quickly; "it is queer a little, just that! I mean, I don't know what I ought to do, and I'm afraid of seeming inattentive. What *is* a companion's work, Mrs. Kincaid?"

"Well, I've never had one," the old lady said with a laugh. "I think you and I will get on best, do you know, if we forget you've come as companion—if you talk when you like, and keep quiet when you like. You see, it is literally a companion I want, not somebody to ring the bell for me, and order the dinner, and make herself useful. This isn't a big house, and I'm not a fashionable person; I want a woman who'll keep me from moping, and be nice."

Her answer expressed her requirements, and Mary found little expected of her in return for the salary; so little that she wondered sometimes if she earned it, small as it was. Excepting that she was continually conscious that she must never be out of temper, and was frequently obliged to read aloud when she would rather have sat in reverie, she was practically her own mistress. Even, as the days went by, she found herself giving utterance to a thought as it came to her, without pausing to conjecture its reception; speaking with the spontaneity which, with the paid companion, is the last thing to be acquired.

Few pleasures are shorter-lived than the one of being restored to enough to eat; and in a week her sense of novelty had almost worn away. They walked together; sometimes to the sea, but more often in the town, for the approach to the sea tired Mrs. Kincaid. Westport was not a popular watering-place; and in the summer Mary discovered that the population of fifty thousand was not very greatly increased. From Laburnum Lodge it took nearly twenty minutes to reach the shore, and a hill had to be climbed. At the top of the incline the better-class houses came to an end; and after some scattered cottages, an expanse of ragged grass, with a bench or two, sloped to the beach. Despite its

bareness, Mary thought the spot delightful; its quietude appealed to her. She often wished that she could go there by herself.

Of the doctor they saw but little. Now and again he came round for an hour or so, and at first she absented herself on these occasions. But Mrs. Kincaid commented on her retirement and said it was unnecessary; and thenceforward she remained.

She did not chance to be out alone until she had been here nearly three months; and when Mrs. Kincaid inquired one afternoon if she would mind choosing a novel at the circulating library for her she went forth gladly. A desire to see *The Era* and ascertain Carew's whereabouts, had grown too strong to be subdued.

She crossed the interlying churchyard, and made her way along the High Street impatiently; and, reaching the railway bookstall, bought a copy of the current issue. It was with difficulty she restrained herself from opening it on the platform, but she waited until she had turned down the little lane at the station's side, and reached the gate where the coal-trucks came to an end and a patch of green began. She doubted whether the company would be touring so long, but the paper would tell her something of his doings anyhow. She ran her eye eagerly down

the titles headed "On the Road." No, *The Foibles* evidently was not out now. Had the tour broken up for good, she wondered, or was there merely a vacation? She could quickly learn by Tony's professional card. How well she knew the sheet! The sheet! she knew the column, its very number in the column—knew it followed "Farrell" and came before "de Vigne." She even recalled the week when he had abandoned the cheaper advertisements in alphabetical order; he had been cast for a part in a production. She remembered she had said, "Now you're going to create," and, laughing, he had answered, "Oh, I must have half a crown's worth 'to create'!" He had been lying on the sofa—how it all came back to her! What was he doing now? She found the place in an instant:

"MR. SEATON CAREW,

RESTING,

Assumes direction of Miss Olive Westland's Tour, Aug. 4th.
See 'Companies' page."

They were married! She could not doubt it. "Oh," she muttered, "how he has walked over me, that man! For the sake of two or three

thousand pounds, just for the sake of her money!" She sought weakly for the company advertisement referred to, but the paragraphs swam together, and it was several minutes before she could find it. Yes, here it was: "*The Foibles of Fashion* and Répertoire, opening August 4th." *Camille*, eh? She laughed bitterly. He was going to play Armand; he had always wanted to play Armand; now he could do it! "Under the direction of Mr. Seaton Carew. Artists respectfully informed the company is complete. All communications to be addressed: Mr. Seaton Carew, Bath Hotel, Bournemouth." Oh, my God!

To think that while she had been starving in that attic he had proceeded with his courtship, to reflect that in one of those terrible hours that she had passed through he must have been dressing himself for his wedding, wrung her heart. And now, while she stood here, he was calling the other woman "Olive," and kissing her. She gripped the bar with both hands, her breast heaved tumultuously; it seemed to her that her punishment was more than she had power to bear. Wasn't his sin worse than her own? she questioned; yet what price would he ever be called upon to pay for it? At most, perhaps, occasional discontent! Nobody would blame him

a bit; his offence was condoned already by a decent woman's hand. In the wife's eyes she, Mary, was of course an adventuress who had turned his weakness to account until the heroine appeared on the scene to reclaim him. How easy it was to be the heroine when one had a few thousand pounds to offer for a wedding-ring!

She let the paper lie where it had fallen, and went to the library. In leaving it she met Kincaid on his way to the Lodge. He was rather glad of the meeting, the man to whom women had been only patients; he had felt once or twice of late that it was agreeable to talk to Miss Brettan.

"Hallo," he said, in that voice of his that had so few inflexions; "what have you been doing? Going home?"

"I've been to get a book for Mrs. Kincaid," she answered. "She was hoping you'd come round to-day."

"I meant to come yesterday. Well, how are you getting on? Still satisfied with Westport? Not beginning to tire of it yet?"

"I like it very much," she said, "naturally. It's a great change from my life three months ago; I shouldn't be very grateful if I weren't satisfied."

"That's all right. Your coming was a good

thing; my mother was saying the other evening it was a slice of luck."

"Oh, I'm so glad! I have wanted to know whether I—did."

"You 'do' uncommonly; I haven't seen her so content for a long while. You don't look very bright; d'ye feel well?"

"It's the heat," she said; "yes, I'm quite well, thank you; I have a headache this afternoon, that's all."

She was wondering if her path and Carew's would ever cross again. How horrible if chance brought him to the theatre here and she came face to face with him in the High Street!

"Hasn't my mother been out to-day herself? She ought to make the most of the fine weather."

"I left her in the garden; I think she likes that better than taking walks."

And it might happen so easily! she reflected. Why not *that* company, among the many companies that came to Westport? She'd be frightened to leave the house.

"I suppose when you first heard there was a garden you expected to see apple-trees and strawberry-beds, didn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's not a bad little garden. We had tea in it last night."

She might be walking with Mrs. Kincaid, and

Tony and his wife would come suddenly round a corner. And "Miss Westland" would look contemptuous, and Tony would start, and—and if she turned white, she'd loathe herself!

"Did you? You must enliven the old lady a good deal if she goes in for that sort of thing!"

"Oh, it was stuffy indoors, and we thought that tea outside would be nicer. I daresay I'm better than no one; it must have been rather dull for her alone."

"Is that the most you find to say of yourself—'better than no one'?"

"Well, I haven't high spirits; some women are always laughing. We sit and read, or do needle-work; or she talks about you, and——"

"And you're bored. That's a mother's privilege, you know, to bore everybody about her son; you mustn't be hard on her."

"I am interested; I think it's always interesting to hear of a man's work in a profession. And, then, Medicine was my father's."

"Were you the only child?"

"Yes. I wasn't much of a child, though! My mother died when I was very young, and I was taught a lot through that. The practice wasn't very good—very remunerative, that's to say—and if a girl's father isn't well off she becomes a woman early. If I had had a brother now——"

"If you had had a brother—what?"

"I was thinking it might have made a difference. Nothing particular. I don't suppose he'd have been of any monetary assistance; there wouldn't have been anything to give him a start with. But I should have liked a brother—one older than I am."

"You'd have made the right kind of man of him, I believe."

"I was thinking of what he'd have made of me. A brother must be such a help; a boy gets experience, and a girl has only instinct."

"It's a pretty good thing to go on with."

"It needs education, doctor, surely?"

"It needs educating by a mother. Half the women who have children are no more fit to be mothers than—— And one comes across old maids with just the qualities! Fine material allowed to waste!"

The entrance to a cottage that they were passing stood open, and she could see into the parlour. There were teacups on the table, and a mug of wild flowers. On a garden-gate a child in a pink pinafore was slowly swinging. The brilliance of the day had subsided, and the town lay soft and yellow in the restfulness of sunset. A certain liquidity was assumed by the rugged street in the haze that hung over it; a touch of

transparence gilded its flights of steps, the tiles of the house-tops, and the homely faces of the fisher-folk where they loitered before their doors. There a girl sat netting among the hollyhocks, withholding confession from the youth who lounged beside her, yet lifting at times to him a smile that had not been wakened by the net. The melody of the hour intensified the discord in the woman's soul.

"Don't you think——" said Kincaid.

He turned to her, strolling with his hands behind him. He talked to her, and she answered him, until they reached the house.

CHAPTER VIII

SLOWLY there stole into Kincaid's life a new zest. He began to be more eager to walk round to the Lodge; was often reluctant to rise and say good-night; even found the picture of the little lamplit room lingering with him after the front door had closed. Formerly the visits had been rather colourless. Despite her affection for her son, Mrs. Kincaid was but tepidly interested in the career that engrossed him. She was vaguely proud to have a doctor for a son, but she felt that his profession supplied them with little to talk about when he came; and the man felt that his mother's inquiries about his work were perfunctory. A third voice had done much for the visits, quickened the accustomed questions, the stereotyped replies into the vitality of conversation.

Kincaid did not fail to give Miss Brettan credit for the brighter atmosphere of the villa. But winter was at hand before he admitted that much of the pleasure that he took in going there was inspired by a hearty approval of Miss

Brettan. The cosiness of the room, with two women smiling at him when he entered—always with a little surprise, for the time of his coming was uncertain—and getting things for him, and being sorry when he had to leave had had a charm that he did not analyse. It was by degrees that he realised how many of his opinions were directed to her. His one friendship hitherto had been for Corri; and Corri was not here. The months when his cordial liking for Mary was clear to him, and possessed of a fascination due very largely to its unexpectedness, were perhaps the happiest that he had known.

The development was not so happy; but it was fortunately slow. He had gone to the house earlier than usual, and the women were preparing for a walk. Mary stood by the mantelpiece. There was something they had meant to do; she said she would go alone to do it. He lay back in the depths of an arm-chair, and watched her while she spoke to his mother, watched the play of her features and the quick turn of her cheek. Then—it was the least significant of trivialities—she plucked a hairpin from her hair, and began to button her glove. It was revealed to him as he contemplated her that she was eminently lovable. His eyes dwelt on the tender curve of her figure, displayed by the flexion of her arm;

he remarked the bend of the head, and the delicate modelling of her ear and neck. These things were quite new to him. He was stirred abruptly by the magic of her sex. The admiration did not last ten seconds, and before he saw her again he recollected it only once, quite suddenly. But the development had begun.

In his next visit he looked to see these beauties, and found them. This time, being voluntary, the admiration lasted longer. It was recurrent all the evening. He discovered a novel excellence in her performance of the simplest acts, and an additional enjoyment in talking with her.

Thoughts of her came to him now while he sat at night in his room. The bare little room witnessed all the phases of the man's love—its brightness, and then its misgivings. He had no confidant to prose to; he could never have spoken of the strange thing that had happened to him, if he had had a confidant. He used to sit alone and think of her, wondering if God would put it into her heart to care for him, wondering in all humility if it could be ordained that he should ever hold this dear woman in his arms and call her "wife."

He would not be in a position to give her luxury, and for a couple of years certainly he could not marry at all; but he believed primarily

that he could at least make her content; and in reflecting what she would make of life for him, he smiled. The salary that he drew from his post was not a very large one, but his mother's means sufficed for her requirements, and he was able to lay almost the whole of it aside. He thought that when a couple of years had gone by, he would be justified in furnishing a small house, and that he might reasonably expect, through the introductions procured by his appointment, to establish a practice. It would be rather pinched for them at first, of course, but she wouldn't mind that much if she were fond of him. "Fond" of him! Could it be possible? he asked himself—Miss Brettan fond of him! She was so composed, so quiet, she seemed such a long way off now that he wanted her for his own. Would it really ever happen that the woman whose hand had merely touched him in courtesy would one day be uttering words of love for him and saying "my husband"?

He wrestled long with his tenderness; the misgivings came quickly. After all, she was comfortable as she was—she was provided for, she had no pecuniary cares here. Had he the right to beg her to relinquish this comparative ease and struggle by his side oppressed by the worries of a precarious income? Then he told

himself that they might take in patients: that would augment the income. And she was a dependent now; if she married him she would be her own mistress.

He weighed all the pros and cons; he was no boy to call the recklessness of self-indulgence the splendour of devotion. He balanced the arguments on either side long and carefully. If he asked her to come to him, it should be with the conviction he was doing her no wrong. He saw how easy it would be to deceive himself, to feel persuaded that the fact of her being in a situation made matrimony an advance to her, whether she married well or ill. He would not act impatiently and perhaps spoil her life. But he was very impatient. Through months he used to come away from the Lodge striving to discern importance in some answer she had made him, some question she had put to him. It appeared to him that he had loved her much longer than he had; and he had made no progress. There were moments when he upbraided himself for being clumsy and stupid; some men in his place, he thought, would have divined long ago what her feelings were.

He never queried the wisdom of marrying her on his own account; the privilege of cherishing her in health and nursing her in sickness, of

having her head pillowed on his breast, and confiding his hopes to her sympathy; of going through life with her in a union in which she would give to him all her sacred and withheld identity, looked to him a joy for which he could never be less than intensely grateful while life endured. He ceased to marvel at the birth of his love, it looked natural now; she seemed to belong to Westport so wholly by this time. He no longer contrasted the present atmosphere of the villa with the duller atmosphere that she had banished. He had forgotten that duller atmosphere. She was there—it was as if she had always been there. To reflect that there had been a period when he had known no Mary Brettan was strange. He wondered that he had not felt the want of her. The day that he had met her in Corri's office appeared to him dim in the mists of at least five years. The exterior of the man, and the yearnings within him—Kincaid as he knew himself, and the doctor as he was known to the hospital—were so at variance that the incongruity would have been ludicrous if it had not been beautiful.

When Mary saw that he had begun to care for her, it was with the greatest tremor of insecurity that she had experienced since the date of her arrival. She had foretasted many disasters in

the interval, been harassed by many fears, but that Dr. Kincaid might fall in love with her was a contingency that had never entered her head. It was so utterly unexpected that for a week she had discredited the evidence of her senses, and when the truth was too palpable to be blinked any longer, her remaining hope was that he might decide never to speak. Here the meditations of the man and the woman were concerned with the same theme—both revolved the claims of silence; but from different standpoints. His consideration was whether avowal was unjust to her; she sustained herself by attributing to him a reluctance to commit himself to a woman of whom he knew so little. She clung to this haven that she had found; her refusal, if indeed he did propose to her, would surely necessitate her relinquishing it. Mrs. Kincaid might not desire to see her companion marry her son, but still less would she desire to retain a companion who had rejected him. It had been as peaceful here as any place could be for her now, felt Mary; the thought of being driven forth to do battle with the world again terrified her. She wondered if Mrs. Kincaid had “noticed anything”; it was hard to believe she could have avoided it; but she had evinced no sign of suspicion: her manner was the same as usual.

With the complication that had arisen to disturb her, the woman perceived how prematurely old she was. Her courage had all gone, she told herself; she said she had passed the capability for any sustained effort; and it was a fact that the uneventful tenor of the life that she had been leading, congenial because it demanded no energy, had done much to render her lassitude permanent. Her pain, the rawness of it, had dulled—she could touch the wound now without writhing; but it had left her wearied unto death. To attempt to forget had been beyond her; recollection continued to be her secret luxury; and the inertia permitted by her position lent itself so thoroughly to a dual existence that, to her own mind, she often seemed to be living more acutely in her reminiscences than in her intercourse with her employer.

From the commencement of the tour, which had started in the autumn of the preceding year, she had kept herself posted in Carew's movements as regularly as was practicable. It was frequently very difficult for her to gain access to a theatrical paper; but generally she contrived to see one somehow, if not on the day that it reached the town, then later. She knew what parts he played, and where he played them. It was a morbid fascination, but to be able to see

his name mentioned nearly every week made her glad that he was an actor. If he could have gone abroad or died, without her being aware of it, she thought her situation would have been too hideous for words. To steal that weekly glimpse of the paper was her weekly flicker of sensation; sometimes the past seemed to stir again; momentarily she was in the old surroundings.

There had been only two tours. After the second, she had watched his "card" anxiously. Three months had slipped away, and between his and his agent's name nothing had been added but the "Resting."

At last, after reading from the London paper to Mrs. Kincaid one day, she derived some further news. A word of the theatrical gossip had caught her eye, and unperceived by the lady, she started violently. She had seen "Seaton Carew." For a minute she could not quell her agitation sufficiently to pick the paper up; she sat staring down at it and deciphering nothing. Then she learnt that Miss Olive Westland, and her husband, Mr. Seaton Carew, encouraged by their successes in the provinces, had completed arrangements to open the Boudoir Theatre at the end of the following month. It was added that this of late unfortunate house had been much embellished, and a reference to an artist or

two already engaged showed Mary that Carew was playing with big stakes.

Henceforth she had had a new source of information, and one attainable without trouble, for the London paper was delivered at the Lodge daily. As the date for the production drew near, her impatience to hear the verdict had grown so strong that the walls of the country parlour cooped her; she saw through them into the city beyond—saw on to a draughty stage where Carew was conducting a rehearsal.

The piece had failed. On the morning when she learned that it had failed, she participated dumbly in the chagrin of the failure. "Yes" and "No" she had answered, and seen with the eyes of her heart the gloom of a face that used to be pressed against her own. She did not care, she vowed; her sole feeling with regard to the undertaking had been curiosity. If it had been more than curiosity she would despise herself!

But she looked at the Boudoir advertisement every day. And it was not long before she saw that another venture was in preparation. And she held more skeins of wool, and watched with veiled eagerness this advertisement develop like its predecessor. Recently the play had been produced, and she had read the notice in Mrs.

Kincaid's presence. When she finished it she guessed that Carew's hopes were over; unless he had a great deal more money than she supposed, the experiment at the Boudoir would see it exhausted. There was not much said for his performance, either; he was dismissed in an indifferent sentence, like his wife. High praise of his acting might have led to London engagements, but his hopes seemed to have miscarried as manager and as actor too.

When Kincaid went round to the house one evening, the servant told him his mother had gone to her room, and that Miss Brettan was sitting with her.

"Say I'm here, please, and ask if I may go up."

Mary came down the stairs as he spoke.

"Ah, doctor," she said; "Mrs. Kincaid has gone to bed."

"So I hear. What's the matter with her?"

"Only neuralgia; she has had it all day. She has just fallen asleep."

"Then I had better not go up to see her?"

"I don't think I would. I have just come down to get a book."

"Are you going to sit with her?"

"Yes; she may wake and want something."

They stood speaking in the hall, outside the parlour door.

"Where is your book?" he said.

"Inside. I am sorry you have come round for nothing; she'll be so disappointed when she hears about it. May I tell her you'll come again to-morrow?"

"Yes, I'll look in some time during the day, if it's only for a moment. I think I'll sit down awhile before I go."

"Will you?" she said. "I beg your pardon."

She opened the door, and he followed her into the room.

"You won't mind my leaving you?" she asked; "I don't want to stay away, in case she does wake."

It was nearly dark in the parlour; the lamp had not been lighted, and the fire was low. A little snow whitened the laburnum-tree that was visible through the window. It was an evening in January, and Mary had been in Westport now nearly two years.

"Can you see to find it?" he said. "Where did you leave it?"

"It was on the sideboard; Ellen must have moved it, I suppose. I'll ask her where she's put it."

"No, don't do that; I'll light the lamp."

She lifted the globe while he struck a match. It was his last, and it went out.

"Never mind," he said; "we'll get a light from the fire."

"Oh," she exclaimed, "but I'm giving you so much trouble; you had better let me call the girl!"

A dread of what might happen in this darkness was coming over her. "You had better let me call the girl," she repeated.

"Try if you can get a light with this first," he said—"try there, where it's red."

She bent over the grate, the twist of paper in one hand, and the other resting on the mantelpiece. He leant beside her, stirring the ashes with his foot.

It flashed back at her how Tony had stood stirring the ashes with his foot that night in Leicester, while he broke his news. A sickening anxiety swept through her to get away from Kincaid before he could have a chance to touch her. The paper charred and curled, without catching flame, and in her impatience she hated him for the delay. She hated herself for being here, lingering in the twilight with a man who dared to feel about her in the same way as Tony had once felt.

She rose.

"It's no use, doctor; Ellen will have to do it, after all."

"Don't go just yet," he said; "I want to speak to you, Miss Brettan."

"I can't stay any longer," she said. "I——"

"You'll give me a minute? There's something I have been waiting to say to you; I've been waiting a long while."

She raised her face to him. In the shadows filling the room, he could see little more than her eyes.

"Don't say it. I think I can guess, perhaps. . . . Don't say it, Dr. Kincaid!"

"Yes," he insisted, "I must say it; I'm bound to tell you before I take your answer, Mary. My dear, I love you."

Memory gave her back the scene where Tony had said that for the first time.

"If you can't care for me, you have only to tell me so to-night; it shall never be a worry to you—I don't want my love to become a worry to you, to make you wish I weren't here. But if you can care a little . . . if you think that when I'm able to ask you to come to me you could come . . . Oh, my dear, all my life I'll be tender to you—all my life!"

He could not see her eyes any longer; her head was bowed, and in her silence the big man trembled.

The servant came in with the taper, and let

down the blinds. They stood on the hearth, watching her dumbly. When the blinds were lowered, she turned up the lamp; and the room was bright. Kincaid saw that Mary was very pale.

"Is there anything else, miss?"

"No, Ellen, thank you; that's all."

"Mary?"

"I'm so sorry. You don't know how sorry I am!"

"You could never care—not ever so little—for me?"

"Not in that way: no."

He looked away from her—looked at the engraving of Wellington and Blucher meeting on the field of Waterloo; stared at the filter on the sideboard, through which the water fell drop by drop. A heavy weight seemed to have come down upon him, so that he breathed under it laboriously. He wanted to curtail the pause, which he understood must be trying to her; but he could not think of anything to say, nor could he shake his brain clear of her last words, which appeared to him incessantly reiterated. He felt as if his hope of her had been something vital and she had stamped it out, to leave him confronted by a new beginning—a beginning so

strange that time must elapse before he could realise how wholly strange it was going to be. Even while he strove to address her it was difficult to feel that she was still very close to him. Her tones lingered; her dress emphasised itself upon his consciousness more and more; but from her presence he had a curious sense of being remote.

"Good-night," he said abruptly. "You mustn't let this trouble you, you know. I shall always be glad I'm fond of you; I shall always be glad I told you so—I was hoping, and now I understand. It's so much better to understand than to go on hoping for what can never come."

She searched pityingly for something kind; but the futility of phrases daunted her.

"I had better close the door after you," she murmured, "or it will make a noise."

They went out into the passage, and stood together on the step.

"It's beginning to snow," he said; "it looks as if we were going to have a heavy fall."

"Yes," she said dully, glancing at the sky.

She put out her hand, and it lay for an instant in his.

"Well, good-night, again."

"Good-night, Dr. Kincaid."

As he turned, she was silhouetted against the gaslight of the hall. Then her figure was withdrawn, and the view of the interior narrowed—until, while he looked back, the brightness vanished altogether and the door was shut.

CHAPTER IX

AND so it was all over.

"All over," he said to himself—"over and done with, Philip. Steady on, Philip; take it fighting!"

But they were only words—as yet he could not "take it fighting." Nor was the knowledge that he was never to hold her quite all the grief that lay upon him as he made his way along the ill-lit streets. There was, besides, a very cruel smart—the abstract pain of being such a little to one who was so much to him.

He visited the patients who were still awake, and dressed such wounds as needed to be dressed. He heard the little peevish questions and the dull complaints just as he had done the night before. The nurse walked softly past the sleepers with her shaded lamp, and once or twice he spoke to her. And when, the doctor's duties done, the man had gained his room, he thought of his hopes the night before, and sat with elbows on the table while the hours struck, remembering what had happened since.

The necessity for returning to the house so speedily, to see his mother, was eminently distasteful; he longed to escape it. And then suddenly he warmed towards her in self-reproach, thinking it had been very hard of him to wish to neglect his mother in order to spare awkwardness to another woman. His repugnance to the task was deep-rooted, all the same, and it did not lessen as the afternoon approached. But for the fact of yesterday's indisposition, he could never have brought himself to overcome it.

The embarrassment that he had feared, however, was averted by Miss Brettan's absence.

Mrs. Kincaid said that she was quite well again to-day; Mary had told her of his call the previous evening; how long was it he had stopped?

"Oh, not very long," he said; "has the neuralgia quite gone?"

"I feel a little weary after it, that's all. Is there anything fresh, Philip?"

"Fresh?" he answered vaguely. "No, dear. I don't know that there's anything very fresh."

"You look tired yourself," she said; "I thought that perhaps you were troubled?"

She thought, too, that Miss Brettan had looked troubled, and instinct pointed to something having occurred. A conviction that her son was

getting fond of her companion had been unspoken in her mind for some time, and under her placid questions now rankled a little wistfulness, in feeling that she was not held dear enough for confidence. She wanted to say to him outright: "Philip, did you tell Miss Brettan you were fond of her when I was upstairs last night?" but was reluctant to seem inquisitive. He, with never an inkling that she could suspect his love, meanwhile reflected that for Mary's continued peace it was desirable that his mother should never conjecture he had been refused.

It is doubtful whether he had ever felt so wholly tender towards her as he did in these moments while he admitted that it was imperative to keep the secret from her; and perhaps the mother's heart had never turned so far aside from him as while she perceived that she was never to be told.

They exchanged commonplaces with the one grave subject throbbing in the minds of both. Of the two, the woman was the more laboured; and presently he noticed what uphill work it was, and sighed. She heard the sigh, and could have echoed it, thinking sadly that the presence of her companion was required now to make her society endurable to him. But she would not refer to Mary. She bent over her wool-work, and the

needle went in and out with feeble regularity, while she maintained a wounded silence, which the man was regarding as an unwillingness to talk.

He said at last that he must go, and she did not offer to detain him.

"I want to hurry back this afternoon; you won't mind?"

"No," she murmured; "you know what you have to do, Philip, better than I."

He stooped and kissed her. For the first time in her life she did not return his kiss. She gave him her cheek, and rested one hand a little tremulously on his shoulder.

"Good-bye," she said; her tone was so gentle that he did not remark the absence of the caress. "Don't go working too hard, Phil!"

He patted the hand reassuringly, and let himself out. Then the hand crept slowly up to her eyes, and she wiped some tears away. The wool-work drooped to her lap, and she sat recalling a little boy who had been used to talk of the wondrous things he was going to do for mother when he became a man, and who now had become a man, living for a strange woman, and full of a love which mother might only guess.

She could not feel quite so cordial to Mary as she had done. To think of her holding her son's

confidence, while she herself was left to speculate, made the need for surmises seem harder. And Philip was unhappy: her companion must be indifferent to him; nothing but that could account for the unhappiness, or for the reservation. She could have forgiven her engrossing his affections—in time; but her indifference was more than she could forgive.

Still, this was the woman he loved—and she endeavoured to hide her resentment, as she had hidden her suspicions. Their intercourse during the next week was less free than usual, nevertheless. Perhaps the resentment was less easy to hide, or perhaps Mary's nervousness made her unduly sensitive, but there were pauses which seemed to her significant of condemnation. She was exceedingly uncomfortable during this week. Sometimes she was only deterred from proclaiming what had happened and appealing to the other's fairness to exonerate her, by the recollection that it was, after all, just possible that the avowal might have the effect of transforming a bush into an officer.

She could not venture to repeat the retirement to her room the next time the doctor came. Nearly a fortnight had gone by. And she forced herself to turn to him with a few remarks. He was not the man to disguise his feelings success-

fully by a flow of small-talk; his life had not qualified him for it; and it was an ordeal to him to sit there in the presence of Mary and witness attempts in which he perceived himself unqualified to co-operate. His knowledge that the simulated ease should have originated with himself rather than with her made his ineptitude seem additionally ungracious, and he feared she must think him boorish, and disposed to parade his disappointment for the purpose of exciting her compassion.

Strongly, therefore, as she had wished to avoid a break in the social routine, his subsequent visits were made at longer intervals, and more often than not curtailed on the plea of work. It was, as yet at all events, impossible for him to behave towards her as if nothing untoward had happened, and to shun the house awhile looked to him a wiser course than to haunt it with discomposure patent. Thus the restraint that Mrs. Kincaid was imposing on herself had a further burden to bear: Miss Brettan was keeping her son from her side. The pauses became more frequent, and, to Mary, more than ever ominous. Indeed, while the mother mused mournfully on the consequences of her engagement, the companion herself was questioning how long she could expect to retain it. She began to consider

whether she should relinquish it, to elude the indignity of a dismissal. And even if Mrs. Kincaid did fail to suspect the reason for her son's absenting himself, the responsibility was the same, she reflected. It was she who divided the pair, she who was accountable for the hurt expression that the old lady's face so often wore now. She felt wearily that women had a great deal to endure in life, what with the men they cared for, and the men for whom they did not care. There seemed no privileges pertaining to their sex; being feminine only amplified the scope for vexation. A fact which she did not see was that one of the most pathetic things in connection with the unloved lover is the irritability with which the woman so often thinks about him.

With what sentiments she might have listened to Kincaid had she met him prior to her intimacy with Carew one may only conjecture. Now he touched her not at all; but the intimacy had been an experience which engulfed so much of her sensibility, that she had emerged from it a different being. Kincaid's rival, in truth, was the most powerful one that can ever oppose a lover; the rival of constant remembrance—always a doughty antagonist, and never so impregnable as when the woman is instinctively a virtuous

woman and has fallen for the man that she remembers.

It occurred to Mary to seek an opportunity for letting the doctor know that he was paining his mother by so rarely coming now; but such an opportunity was not easy to gain, for when he did come his mother of course was present. She thought of writing, but by word of mouth a hint would suffice, while a letter, in the circumstances, would have its awkwardness.

More than two months had gone by when Mrs. Kincaid made her complaint. It was on a Sunday morning. Mary was standing before the window, looking out, while the elder woman sat moodily in her accustomed seat.

"Are we going to church?" asked Mary.

"Yes, I suppose so; there's plenty of time, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes, it's early yet—not ten. [What a lovely day! The spring has begun."

"Yes," assented the other absently.

There was a short silence, and then:

"I shan't run any risk of missing Dr. Kincaid by going out; I needn't be afraid of that!" she added.

Her voice had in it so much more of pathos than of testiness, that after the instant's dismay her companion felt acutely sorry for her.

"A doctor's time is scarcely his own, is it?" she murmured, turning.

Mrs. Kincaid did not reply immediately, and the delay seemed to Mary to accentuate the feebleness of her answer.

"I mean," she said, "that it isn't as if he were able to leave the hospital whenever he liked. There may be cases——"

"He used to be able to come often; why shouldn't he be able now?"

"Yes——" faltered Mary.

"I haven't asked him; it is a good reason that keeps him from me, of course. But it's hard, when you're living in the same town as your son, not to have him with you more than an hour in a month. I don't see much more of him than that, lately. The last time he came, he stayed twenty minutes. The time before, he said he was in a hurry before he said, 'How do you do?' He never put his hat down—you may have noticed it?"

"Yes, I noticed it," Mary admitted.

"You know; oh, you do know!" she cried inwardly, with a sinking of the heart. "Now, what am I to do?"

"Don't imagine I am blaming him," went on Mrs. Kincaid, "I am not blaming anybody; the reason may be very strong indeed. Only it

seems rather unfair that I should have to suffer for it, considering that I don't hear what it is."

"Then why not speak to Dr. Kincaid? If he understood that you felt his absence so keenly, you may be sure he'd try to come oftener. Why don't you tell him that you miss him?"

"I shall never sue to my son for his visits," said the old lady with a touch of dignity, "nor shall I ask him why he stays away. That is quite his own affair. At my age we begin to see that our children have rights we mustn't intrude into—secrets that must be told to us freely, or not told at all. We begin to see it, only we are old to learn. There, my dear, don't let us talk about it; it's not a pleasant subject. I think we had better go and dress."

Mary looked at her helplessly; there was a finality in her tone which precluded the possibility of any advance. It was more than ever manifest that the task of remonstrating with him devolved upon Mary herself, and she decided to write to him that afternoon. Shortly after dinner Mrs. Kincaid went into the garden, and, left to her own devices in the parlour, Mary drew her chair to the escritoire. She would write a few lines, she thought, however clumsy, and send them at once. Still, they were not easy lines to produce, and she nibbled her pen a good

deal in the course of their composition; the self-consciousness that invaded some of the sentences was too glaring. When the note was finished at last, she slipped it into her pocket, and told Mrs. Kincaid she would like to go for a walk.

"Oh, by all means; why not?"

"I thought perhaps you might want me."

"No," said Mrs. Kincaid; "I shall get along very well—I'm gardening."

She was, indeed, more cheerful than she had been for some time, busying herself among the violets, and stooping over the crocuses to clear the soil away.

"Go along," she added, nodding across her shoulder; "a walk will do you good!"

Though the wish had been expressed only to avoid giving the letter to a servant, Mary thought that she might as well profit by the chance; and from the post-office she sauntered as far as the beach. Then it struck her that the doctor might pay his overdue visit this afternoon, and she was sorry that she had gone out. The laboured letter might have been dispensed with—she might have had a word with him before he joined his mother in the garden! She turned back at once—and as she neared the Lodge, she saw him leaving it. They met not fifty yards from the door.

"Well, have you enjoyed your walk—you haven't been very far?" he said.

"Not very," said she; "I changed my mind. How did you find your mother?"

"She had been pottering about on the wet ground, which wasn't any too wise of her. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I . . . She has been missing you a little, I think; she wants you there more often."

"Oh?" he said; "I'm very sorry. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure; it is more than a little she misses you. As a matter of fact, I have just written to you, Dr. Kincaid."

"To me? What—about this?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know," he said; "I never supposed she'd miss me like that. It was very kind of you."

"I wanted to speak to you about it before. I have seen for some time she was distressed."

"Has she said anything?"

"She only mentioned it this morning, but I've noticed."

"It was very kind of you," he repeated; "I'm much obliged."

Both suffered slightly from the consciousness

of suppression; and after a few seconds she said boldly:

"Dr. Kincaid, if you're staying away with any idea of sparing embarrassment to me, I beg that you won't."

"Well, of course," he said, "I thought you'd rather I didn't come."

"But do you suppose I can consent to keep you from your mother's house? You must see . . . the responsibility of it! What I should like to know is, are you staying away solely for my sake?"

"I didn't wish to intrude my trouble on you."

"No," she said; "that isn't what I mean. I am glad I have met you; I want to speak to you plainly. I have thought that perhaps it hurt you to come; that my being there reminded—that you didn't like it? If that's so——"

"I think you're exaggerating the importance of the thing! It is very nice and womanly of you, but you are making yourself unhappy for nothing. I have had a good deal to occupy me of late—in future I'll go oftener."

"I feel very guilty," she answered. "If I am right in thinking it would be pleasanter for you to stay away than to go there and see me, my course is clear. It's not my home, you know; I'm in a situation, and it can be given up."

"You mustn't talk like that. I must have blundered very badly to give you such an idea. Don't let's stand here! Do you mind turning back a little way? If what I said to you obliged you to leave Westport, I should reproach myself for it bitterly."

They strolled slowly down the street; and during a minute each of the pair sought phrases.

"It's certain," she said abruptly, "that my being your mother's companion is quite wrong! If I weren't in the house you'd go there the same as you used to. I can't help feeling that."

"But I *will* go there the same as I used to. I have said so."

"Yes," she murmured.

"Doesn't that satisfy you?"

"You'll go, but the fact remains that you'd rather not; and the cause of your reluctance is my presence there."

"It is you who are insisting on the reluctance," he fenced; "*I've* not said I am reluctant. I thought you'd prefer me to avoid you for a while; personally——"

"Oh!" she said, "do you think I've not seen? I know very well the position is a false one!"

"I told you I'd never become a worry to you," he said humbly; "I've been trying to keep my word."

"You've been everything that is considerate; the fault is my own. I ought to have resigned the place the day after you spoke to me."

"I don't think that would have helped me much. You must understand that a change like that was the very last thing I wanted my love to affect."

At the word "love" the woman flinched a little, and he himself had not been void of sensation in uttering it. The sound of it was loud to both of them. But to her it added to the sense of awkwardness, while to the man it seemed to bring them nearer to each other.

"It was very dense of me," he went on; "but with all the consequences of speaking to you that I foresaw I never took into account the one that has happened. I wondered if I was justified in asking you to give up a comfortable living for such a home as I could offer; I considered half a dozen things; but that I might be making the house unbearable to you I overlooked. Now, with your interest at heart all the time, I've injured you! I can't tell you how sorry I am to learn it."

"It's not unbearable," she said; "'unbearable' is much too strong. But I do see my duty, and I know the right thing is for me to go away; your mother would have you then as she ought to have

you. While I stop, it can never be really free for either of you. And of course she knows!"

"Do you think she does?" he exclaimed.

"Are women blind? Of course she knows! And what can she feel towards me? It's only the affection she has for you that prevents her discharging me."

"Oh, don't!" he said. "Discharging' you!"

"What am I? I'm only her servant. Don't blink facts, Dr. Kincaid; I'm your mother's companion, a woman you had never seen two years ago. It would have been a good deal better for you if you had never seen me at all!"

"You can't say what would have been best for *me*," he returned unsteadily; "I'd rather have known you as I do than that we hadn't met. For yourself, perhaps—"

"Hush!" she interrupted; "we can neither of us forget what our meeting was. For myself, I owe my very life to meeting you; that's why the result of it is so abominable—such a shame! I haven't said much, but I remember every day what I owe you. I know I owe you the very clothes I wear."

"Oh, for God's sake!" he muttered.

"And my repayment is to make you unhappy—and her unhappy. It's noble!"

Her pace quickened, and to see her excited acted upon him very strongly. He longed to comfort her, and because this was impossible by reason of the disparity of their sentiments, the sight of her emotion was more painful. He had never felt the hopelessness of his attachment so heavy on him as now that he saw her disturbed on account of it, and realised at the same time that it debarred him from offering her consolation. They walked along, gazing before them fixedly into the vista of the shut-up shops and Sunday quietude, until at last he said with an effort:

"If you did go you'd make me unhappier than ever."

She did not reply to this; and after a glance at the troubled profile:

"I am ready to do whatever you want," he added; "whatever will make the position easiest to you. It seems that, with the best intentions, I've only succeeded in giving annoyance to you both. But the wrong to my mother can be remedied; and if I drive you away I shall have done some lasting harm. . . . Why don't you say that you'll remain?"

"Because I'm not sure about it. I can't determine."

"Your objection was the fancy that you were responsible for my seeing her so seldom; I've promised to see her as often as I can."

She bit her lip. She said nothing.

"I can't do any more—can I?"

"No," she confessed.

"Then, what's the matter?"

"The matter is that——"

"What?"

"You show me more plainly every minute that I *ought* to go."

Something in the dumbness with which the announcement was received told her how unexpected it had been. And, indeed, to hear that his love, unperceived by himself, had been fighting against him was the hardest thing that he had had to bear. Sensible that every remonstrance that escaped him would estrange them further, the man felt helpless. They were crossing the churchyard now, and she said something about the impracticability of her going any further.

"Well, as you'll come oftener, our talk hasn't been useless!"

"Wait a second," he said. He paused by the porch, and looked at her. "I can't leave you like this. Mary——!"

"Oh!" she faltered, "don't say anything—don't!"

"I must. What's the good?—I keep back everything, and you still know! You'll always know. Nothing could have been more honestly meant than my assurance that I'd never bring distress to you, and I've brought distress. Let's look the thing squarely in the eyes: you won't be my wife, but you needn't go away. What would you do? Whom do you know? Leaving my loss of you out of the question, think of my self-reproach!"

Inside the church an outburst of children's voices, muffled somewhat by the shut door, but still too near to be wholly beautiful, rose suddenly in a hymn. She stood with averted face, staring over the rankness of the grass that the wind was stirring lightly among the gravestones.

"Let's look at the thing squarely for once," he said again. "We're both remembering I love you—there's nothing gained by pretending. If the circumstances were different, if you had somewhere to go I should have less right to interfere; but as it is, your leaving would mean a constant shame to me. All the time I should be thinking: 'She was at peace in a home, and you drove her out from it!' To see the woman he

cares for go away, unprotected, among strangers, to want perhaps for the barest necessities—what sort of man could endure it? I should feel as if I had turned you out of doors.”

A sudden tremor seized her; she shivered.

“Sit down,” he said authoritatively. “We must come to an understanding!”

But his protest was not immediately continued, and in the shelter of the porch both were thoughtful. She was the first to speak again, after all.

“You’re persuading me to be a great coward,” she said; “and I am not a very brave woman at the best. If I do what is right, I may give you pain for a little while, but I shall spare you the unhappiness you’ll have if you go on meeting me.”

“You consider my happiness and her happiness, but not your own. And why?—you’d spare me nothing.”

“You’ll never be satisfied. Oh, yes, let us be honest with each other, you’re right! Your misgivings about me are true enough; but you are principally anxious for me to stop that you may still see me. And what’ll come of it? I can never marry you, never; and you’ll be wretched. If I gave you a chance to forget——”

“I shall never forget, whether you stop or whether you go.”

"You *must* forget!" she cried. "You must forget me till it is as if you had never known me. I won't be burdened with the knowledge that I'm spoiling your life. I won't!"

"Mary!" he said appealingly.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it's cruel! I wish to God I had died before you loved me!"

"You don't know what you're saying! You make me feel—— Why," he demanded, under his breath—"why could it never be—in time, if you stay? I'll never speak of it any more till you permit it, not a sign shall tell you I'm waiting; but by-and-by—will it be always impossible? Dearest, it holds me so fast, my love of you. Don't be harsher than you need; it's so real, so deep. Don't refuse me the right to hope—in secret, by myself; it's all I have, all I'll ask of you for years, if you like—the right to think that you may be my wife some day. Leave me that!"

"I can't," she said thickly; "it would be a lie."

"You could never care for me—not so much as to let *me* care for *you*?"

A movement answered him, and his head was lowered. He sat, his chin supported by his palm, watching the restless working of her hand in her lap. The closing words of the hymn came out distinctly to them both, and they listened till

the hush fell, without knowing that they listened.

"May I ask you one thing? You know I shall respect your confidence. Is it because you care for some other man?"

"No, no," she said vehemently, "I do not care!"

"Thank God for that! While there's no one you like better, you'll be the woman I want and wait for to the end."

Her hands lay still; the compulsion for avowal was confronting her at last. To hear this thing and sanction it by leaving him unenlightened would be a wrong that she dared not contemplate; and under the necessity for proclaiming that her sentiments could never affect the matter, she turned cold and damp. Twice she attempted the finality required, and twice her lips parted without sound.

"Dr. Kincaid——"

He raised his eyes to her, and the courage faded.

"Don't think," he said, "that I shall ever make you sorry for telling me that. You've simply removed a dread. I'm grateful to you."

"Oh," she murmured, in a suffocating voice, "it makes no difference. How am I to explain the—why don't you understand?"

"What is it I should understand?"

"You mustn't be grateful; you're mistaken. Never in the world, so long as we live! There was someone else; I——"

"Be open with me," he said sternly; "in common fairness, let us have clearness and truth! You just declared that you didn't care for anyone?"

"No," she gasped, "I did say that—I meant I didn't care. I don't—we neither care; he doesn't know if I am alive, but . . . there used to be another man, and——"

"Oh, my God, you are going to tell me you are married?"

She shook her head. His eyes were piercing her; she felt them on her wherever she looked.

"Then speak and be done! 'There was another man.' What more?"

Suddenly the first fear had entered his veins, and, though he was conscious only of a vague oppression, he was already terrified by the anticipation of what he was going to hear.

"'There was another man,'" he repeated hoarsely. "What of him?"

She was leaning forward, stooping so that her face was completely hidden. With the silence that had fallen inside the church, the scene was quieter than it had been, and the stillness in the air intensified her difficulty of speech. She

struggled to evolve from her confusion the phrase to express her impurity, but all the terms looked shameless and unutterable alike; and the travail continued until, faint with the tension of the pause and the violent beating of her heart, she said almost inaudibly:

“I lived with him three years.”

CHAPTER X

SHE heard him catch his breath, and then they sat motionless for a long while, just as they had been sitting when she spoke. Now that she had wrenched the fact out, the poignancy of her suffering subsided; even by degrees she realised that, after this, her leaving the town was inevitable, and her thoughts began to concern themselves vaguely with her future. In him consciousness could never waver from the sound of what she had said. She was impure. She had known passion and shame—she herself! The landscape lost its proportion as he stared; the clouds of the sky and the hue of the distance, everything had altered—she was impure.

The laboured minutes passed; he turned and looked slowly down at her averted profile. The curve of cheek was colourless; her hands were still lying clasped on her knee. He watched her for a moment, striving to connect the woman with her words. Something seemed bearing on his brain, so that it did not feel quite near. It did not feel so alive, nor so much his own, as before the vileness of this thing was uttered.

"I have never told you a falsehood," she murmured, "I didn't tell you any falsehood in London. Don't think me all deceit—every word of what I said that day was true."

"I dare say," he answered dully; "I have not accused you."

The change in his tone was pregnant with condemnation to her, and she wondered if he was believing her; but, indeed, he hardly recognised that she had said anything requiring belief. Her assurance appeared juvenile to him, incongruous. There was an air almost of unreality about their being seated here as they were, gazing at the blur of churchyard. Something never to be undone had happened and she was strange.

The service had ended, and, trooping out, the Sunday-school pupils clattered past their feet, shiny and clamorous, and eyeing them with side-long inquisition. She rose nervously, and, rousing himself, he went with her through the crowd of children as far as the gate. There their steps flagged to a standstill, and for a few seconds they remained looking down the lane in silence.

To her, stunned by no shock to make reality less real, these final seconds held the condensed humiliation of the hour. The rigidity with which the man waited beside her seemed eloquent of disgust, and she mused bitterly on what she had

done, how she had abased herself and destroyed his respect; she longed to be free of his reproachful presence. On the gravel behind them one of the bigger girls whispered to another, and the other giggled.

She made a slight movement, and he responded with something impossible to catch. She did not offer her hand; she did not immediately pity him. Had a stranger told him this thing of her, she would have pitied and understood; told him by herself, she understood only that she was being despised. They separated with a mechanical "good-afternoon," quietly and slowly. The two girls, who watched them with precocious eagerness, debated their relationship.

The road lay before him long and bare, and lethargically he took it. He continued to hear her words, "There used to be another man," but he did not know he heard them—he did not actively pursue any train of thought. It was only in momentary intervals that he became aware that he was thinking. The sense of there being something numbed within him still endured, and as yet his condition was more of stupor than of pain.

"There used to be another man!" The sentence hummed in his ears, and as he went along he awoke to it, the persistence of it touched him;

and he began to repeat it—mentally, difficultly, trying to spur his mind into comprehension of it and take it in. He did not suffer acutely even then. There was nothing acute in his feelings whatever. He found it hard to realise, albeit he did not doubt. She was what she had said she was; he knew it. But he could not see her so; he could not imagine her the woman that she had said she used to be. He saw her always as she had been to him, composed and self-contained. The demeanour had been a mask, yet it clung to his likeness of her, obscuring the true identity from him still. He strove to conceive her in her past life, contemning himself because he could not; he wanted to remember that he had been loving a disguise; he wanted to obliterate it. The fact of its having been a disguise and never she all the time was so hard to grasp. He tried to look upon her laughing in dishonour, but the picture would not live; it appeared unnatural. It was the inception of his agony: the feeling that he had known her so very little that it was her real self which seemed the impossible.

And that other man had known it all—seen every mood of her, learned her in every phase!

“Mary!” he muttered; and was lost in the consciousness that actually he had never known “Mary.”

He perceived that the man was moving through his thoughts as a dark man, short and suave, and he wondered how the fancy had arisen. Vaguely he began to wonder what he had been like indeed. It was too soon to question who he was—he wondered only how he looked, in a dim mental searching for the presence to associate her with. Next, the impression vanished, and sudden recollections came to him of men he was accustomed to meet.

The manner and mien of these riveted his attention. It was not by his own will that he considered them; the personalities were insistent. He did not suppose that any one of them had been her lover; he knew that it was chimerical to view any one of them as such; but his brain had been groping for a man, and these familiar men obtruded themselves vividly. The lurking horror of her defilement materialised, so that the sweat burst out on him; the significance of what he had heard flared red upon his vision. To think that it had pleased her to lend herself for the toy of a man's leisure, that some man had been free to make her the boast of his conceit, twisted his heart-strings.

The solidity of the hospital confronted him on the slope that he had begun to mount. Beneath him stretched the herbage of cottage gardens

somnolent in Sabbath calm. Out of the silence came the quick yapping of a shop-boy's dog, the shrillness of a shop-boy's whistle. They were the only sounds. Then he went in.

That evening Miss Brettan told Mrs. Kincaid that she wished to leave her.

The old lady received the announcement without any mark of surprise.

"You know your own mind best," she said meditatively; "but I'm sorry you are going—very sorry."

"Yes," said Mary; "I must go. I'm sorry too, but I can't help myself. I——"

"I used to think you'd stop with me always; we got on so well together."

"You've been more than kind to me from the very first day; I shall never forget how kind you have been! If it were only possible. But it isn't; I——"

Once more the pronoun was the stumbling-block on delicate ground.

"I *can't* stop!" she added thickly; "I hope you'll be luckier with your next companion."

"I shan't have another; changes upset me. And you must go when it suits you best, you know; don't stay on to give me time to make fresh arrangements, as I haven't any to make. Study your own convenience entirely."

"This week?"

"Yes, very well; let it be this week."

They said no more then. But the following afternoon, Mrs. Kincaid broached the subject abruptly.

"What are you going to do, Miss Brettan?" she inquired. "Have you anything else in view?"

"No," said Mary hesitatingly; "not yet."

The suppression of her motive made plain speaking difficult to both.

"I've no doubt, though," she added, "that I shall be all right."

"What a pity it is! What a pity it is, to be sure!"

"Oh, you mustn't grieve about me!" she exclaimed; "it isn't worth that; *I'm* not worth it. You know—you know, so many women in the world have to make a living; and they do make it, somehow. It's only one more."

"And so many women find they can't! Tell me, *must* you go? Are you quite sure you're not exaggerating the necessity? I don't ask you your reasons, I never meddle in people's private affairs. But are you sure you aren't looking on anything in a false light and going to extremes?"

"Oh!" responded Mary, carried into sudden candour, "do you suppose I don't shiver at the prospect? Do you suppose it attracts me? I'm

not a girl, I'm not quixotic; I *can't* stop here!"

The elder woman sighed.

"Why couldn't you care for such a good fellow as my son?" she thought. "Then there would have been none of this bother for any of us!"

"I hope you'll be fortunate," she said gently. "Anything I can do to help you, of course, I will!"

"Thank you," said Mary.

"I mean, you mustn't scruple to refer to me; it's your only chance. Without any references——"

"Yes, I know too well how indispensable they are; but——"

"You have been here two years. I shall say I should have liked it to remain your home."

"Thank you," said Mary again. But she was by no means certain that she could avail herself of this recommendation given in ignorance of the truth. It was precisely the matter that she had been debating. If she attempted to avail herself of it, the doctor might have something to say; and she was loath to be indebted for testimony from the mother which the son would know to be undeserved, whether he interfered, or not; she wanted her renunciation to be complete. Yet,

without this source of aid—— She trembled. How speedily the few pounds in her possession would vanish! how soon there would be a revival of her past experience, with all its heartlessness and squalor! In imagination she was already footsore, adrift in the London streets.

“Mrs. Kincaid——” she cried. A passionate impulse seized her to declare everything. If she had been seventeen, she would have knelt at the old woman’s feet, for it is not so much the vehemence of our moods that diminishes with time as the power of restraint that increases. “Mrs. Kincaid, you must know? You must guess why——”

“I know nothing,” said the old woman, quickly; “I don’t guess!” The colour sank from her face, and Mary had never heard her speak with so much energy. “My son shall tell me—I have a son—I will not hear from you!”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mary; and they were silent.

The same evening Mrs. Kincaid sent a message to the hospital, asking her son to come round to see her.

She had not mentioned that she was going to do so, and it was with a little shock that Mary heard the order given. She supposed, however,

that it was given in her presence by way of a hint, and when the time approached for him to arrive, she withdrew.

He came with misgivings and with relief. The last twenty-four hours had inclined him to the state of tension in which the unexpected is always the portentous, but in which one waits, nevertheless, for something unlooked-for to occur. He did not know what he dreaded to hear, but the summons alarmed him, even while he welcomed it for permitting him to go to the house.

He threw a rapid glance round the parlour, and replied to his mother's greeting with quick interrogation.

"What has happened?"

"Nothing of grave importance has happened. I want to speak to you."

"I was afraid something was the matter," he said, more easily. "What is it?"

He took the seat opposite to her, and she was dismayed to observe the alteration in him. She contemplated him for a few seconds irresolutely.

"Philip," she said, "this afternoon Miss Brettan was anxious to tell me something; she was anxious to make me her confidant. And I wouldn't listen to her."

"Oh?" he said. . . . "And you wouldn't listen to her?"

"No, I wouldn't listen to her. I said, 'My son shall tell me, or I won't hear.' This afternoon I had no more idea of sending for you than you had of coming. But I have been thinking it over; she's in your mother's house, and she's the woman you love. You do love her, Philip?"

"I asked her to be my wife," he answered simply.

"I thought so. And she refused you?"

"Yes, she refused me. If I haven't told you before, it was because she refused me. To have spoken of it to you would have been to give pain—needless pain—to you and to her."

Mrs. Kincaid considered.

"You are quite right," she admitted; "your mistake was to suppose I shouldn't see it for myself." She turned her eyes from him and looked ostentatiously in another direction. "Now," she added, "she is going away. Perhaps you already knew, but——"

"No," he replied, "I didn't know; I thought it likely, but I didn't know. I understand why you sent for me."

He got up and went across to her, and kissed her on the brow.

"I understand why it was you sent for me," he repeated. "What a tender little mother it is! And to lose her companion, too!"

Where he leant beside her, she could not see how white his face had grown.

"Are we going to let her go, Phil?"

He stroked her hand.

"I am afraid we must let her go, mother, as she doesn't want to stop."

"You don't mean to interfere, then? You won't do anything to prevent it?"

"I am not able to prevent it," he rejoined coldly. "I have no authority."

"Indeed?" murmured Mrs. Kincaid. "It seems I might have spared my pains."

"No," said her son; "your pains were well taken. I'm very glad you have spoken to me—or rather I'm very glad to have spoken to you—for you know now I meant no wrong by my silence."

"But—but, Philip——"

"But Miss Brettan must go, mother, because she wishes to!"

"I don't understand you," exclaimed Mrs. Kincaid, bewildered. "I never thought you would care for any woman at all—you never struck me as the sort of man, somehow; but now that you do care, you can't surely mean that you think it right for the woman to leave the only place where she has any friends and go

out into the world by herself? Don't you say you are in love with her?"

"I asked Miss Brettan to marry me," he answered. "Since you put the question, I do think it right for her to leave the place; I think every woman would wish to leave in the circumstances. I think it would be indelicate to restrain her."

"Your sense of delicacy is very acute for a lover," said the old lady grimly; "much too fine a thing to be comfortable. And I'll tell you what is greater still—your pride. Don't imagine you take me in for a moment; look behind you in the glass and ask yourself if it's likely!"

He had moved apart from her now and was lounging on the hearth, but he did not attempt to follow her advice. Nor did he deny the implication.

"I look pretty bad," he acknowledged, "I know. But you're mistaken, for all that; my pride has nothing to do with it."

"You're making yourself ill at the prospect of losing her, and yet you won't—— Not but what she must be mad to reject you, certainly! I am not standing up for her, don't think it! I don't say I wanted to see you fond of her—I should have preferred to see you marry someone

who would have been of use to you and helped you in your career. You might have done a great deal better; and I am sure I understand your having a proper pride in the matter and objecting to beg her to remain. But, for all that, if you do find so much in this particular woman that you are going to be miserable without her, why, *I* can say something to induce her to stop!"

"To the woman you would prefer me not to marry?" he said wearily. "But you mustn't do it, mother."

"I do want to see you marry her, Philip; I want to see you happy. You don't follow me a bit. Since the dread of her loss can make you look like that, you mustn't lose her; that's what I say."

"I *have* lost her," he returned; "I follow you very well. You think I might have married a princess, and you would have viewed that with a little pang too. You would give me to Miss Brettan with a big pang, but you'd give me to her because you think I want her."

"That is it—not a very big pang, either; I know every man is the best judge of his own life. Indeed, it oughtn't to be a pang at all; I don't think it *is* a pang, only a tiny—— A sweetheart is always a mother's rival just at first, Phil; and I suppose it's always the mother's

fault. But one day, when you're married to Mary, and a boy of your own falls in love with a strange girl, your wife will tell you how *she* feels. She'll explain it to you better than I can, and then you'll know how *your* mother felt and it won't seem so unnatural."

"Oh," he said, "hush! Don't! I shall never be married to Mary."

"Yes," she declared, "you will. When you say that, you're not the 'best judge' any longer; it isn't judgment, it's pique, and I'm not going to have your life spoiled by pique and want of resolution. Phil, Phil, you're the last man I should have thought would have allowed a thing he wanted to slip through his fingers. And a woman—women often say 'no,' to begin with. It's not the girls who are to be had for the asking who make the best wives; the ones who are hardest to win are generally the worthiest to hold. Don't accept her answer, Phil! I'll persuade her to stay on, and at first you needn't come very often—I won't mind any more, I shall know what it means; and when you do come, I'll help you and tell you what to do. She *shall* get fond of you; you *shall* have the woman you want—I promise her to you!"

"Mother," he said—the pallor had touched his lips—"don't say that! Don't go on talking of

what can't be. It's no misunderstanding to be made up; it isn't any courtship to be aided. I tell you you can no more give me Mary Brettan for my wife than you can give my childhood back to me out of eternity."

"And I tell you I will!" said she. "'Faint-heart——' But you *shall* have your 'fair lady'! Yes, instead of—you remember what we used to say to you when you were a little boy? 'There's a monkey up your back, Phil!'—you shall have your fair lady instead of the monkey that's up your back. It's a full-grown monkey to-night and you're too obstinate to listen to reason. By-and-by you'll see you were wrong. She *is* suited to you; the more I think about it, the more convinced I am she would make you comfortable. You might have thrown yourself away on some silly girl without a thought beyond her hats and frocks. And she's interested in your profession; you've always been able to talk to her about it; she understands these things better than I do."

"Listen," exclaimed Kincaid with repressed passion, "listen, and remember what you said just now—that I am a man, to judge for myself! You mustn't ask Miss Brettan to stay, and you are not to think that it is her going that makes me unhappy. My hope is over. Between her

and me there would never be any marriage if she remained for years. Everything was said, and it was answered, and it is done."

He bit the end from a cigar, and smoked a little before he spoke any more. When he did speak, his tones were under control; anyone from whom his face had been hidden would have pronounced the words stronger than the feeling that dictated them.

"Something else: after to-night don't talk to me about her. I don't want to hear; it's not pleasant to me. If you want to prove your affection, prove it by that. While she's here I can't see you; when she's gone, let us talk as if she had never been."

The aspect of the man showed of what a tremendous strain this affected calmness was the outcome. Indeed, the deliberateness of the words, even more than the words themselves, hushed her into a conviction of his sincerity, which was disquieting because she found it so inexplicable. She smoothed the folds of her dress, casting at him, from time to time, glances full of wistfulness and pity; and at last she said, in the voice of a person who resigns herself to bewilderment:

"Well, of course I'll do as you wish. But you

have both very queer notions of what is right, that's certain; help seems equally repugnant to the pair of you."

"Why do you say that?" inquired Kincaid. "What help has Miss Brettan declined?"

"She was reluctant to refer anybody to me, I thought, when I mentioned the matter to-day. I suppose that was another instance of delicacy over my head."

"The reference? She won't make use of it?"

"She seemed very doubtful of doing so. I said: 'Without any reference, what on earth will become of you?' And she said, 'Yes, she understood, but——' But something; I forget exactly what it was now."

"But that's insane!" he said imperatively. "She'll be helpless without it. She has been your companion, and you have had no fault to find with her; you can conscientiously say so."

He rose, and shook his coat clear of the ash that had fallen in a lump from the cigar.

"Nothing that has passed between Miss Brettan and me can affect her right to your testimony to the two years that she has lived with you; I should like her to know I said so."

"I will tell her," affirmed his mother. "What are you going to do?"

"It's getting late. . . . By the way, there's

another thing. It will be a long while before she finds another home, at the best; she mustn't think I have anything to do with it, but I want her to take some money before she goes, to keep her from distress. . . . Where did I leave my hat?"

"You want me to persuade her to take some money, as if it were from me?"

"Yes, as if it were from you—fifty pounds—to keep her from distress. . . . Did I hang it up outside?"

His mother went across to him and wound her arms about his neck.

"Can you spare so much, Philip?"

"I have been putting by," he said, "for some time."

CHAPTER XI

MARY had spent the evening very anxiously. The formless future was a terror that she could not banish; she could evolve no definite line of action to sustain a hope.

She awoke from a troubled sleep with a startled sense of something having happened. After a few seconds, the cause was repeated. The silence was broken by the jangling of a bell, and nervous investigation proved it to be Mrs. Kincaid's.

The old lady explained that she was feeling very unwell—an explanation that was corroborated by her voice—and, striking a light, Mary saw that she was shivering violently.

"I can't stop it; and I'm so cold. I don't know what it is; it's like cold water running down my back."

Her companion looked at her quickly. "We'll put some more blankets on the bed. Wait a minute while I run upstairs!"

She returned with the bedclothes from her own room.

"You'll be much warmer before long," she said; "you must have taken a slight chill."

Mrs. Kincaid lay mute awhile.

"I've such a pain," she murmured. "How could I have taken a chill?"

"Where is your pain?"

"In my side—a sharp, stabbing pain."

The servant appeared now, alarmed by the disturbance, and Mary told her to bring some coals, and then to dress herself as speedily as she could.

"Is there any linseed? Or oatmeal will do. I must make a poultice."

"I'll see, miss. There's some linseed, I think, but——"

"Fetch it, and a kettle. We'll light the fire at once; then I can make it up here."

The old lady moaned and shivered by turns; and some difficulty was experienced in getting the fire to burn. Mary held a newspaper before it, and the servant advanced theories on the subject of the chimney.

At last, when it was possible for the poultice to be applied, Mary sent her down for a hot-water bottle and the whisky.

"You'll be quite comfortable directly," she said to the invalid. "Something warm to drink,

and the hot flannel to your feet'll make a lot of difference."

"So cold I am, it's bitter—and the pain! I can't think what it can be."

"Let me put this on for you, then; it's all ready. It won't—is that it? . . . There! How's that?"

"Oh!" faltered Mrs. Kincaid, "oh, thank you! Ah! you do it very nicely."

"See, here is the rest of the luxuries!" She mixed the stimulant, and took it to her. "Just raise your head," she murmured; "I'll hold the glass for you, so that you won't have to sit up. Take this, now, and while you're sipping it, Ellen will get the bottle ready."

"There isn't much in the kettle," said Ellen. "I don't——"

"Use what there is, and fill it up again. Then see if you can find me any brown paper."

In quest of brown paper, Ellen was gone some time; and, having set down the empty tumbler and made the bed tidier, Mary proceeded to search for some herself.

She found a sheet lining a drawer, and rolling it into the form of a tube, fixed it to the kettle spout, to direct the steam into the room. She had not long done so when the girl returned dis-

console to say there was no brown paper in the house. Mary drew her outside.

"Are you going to sit in there all night, miss?"

"Speak lower! Yes, I shall sit up. What time is it?"

The girl said that she had just been astonished to see by the kitchen clock that it was half-past four; it had seemed to her that she had not long fallen asleep when the bell rang.

"I want you to go and fetch Dr. Kincaid, Ellen; I'm afraid Mrs. Kincaid is going to be ill."

"Do you mean I'm to go at once?"

"Yes. Tell him his mother isn't well, and it would be better for him to see her. Bring him back with you. You aren't frightened to go out—it must be getting light?"

They drew up the blind of the landing window, and saw daylight creeping over the next-door yard.

"Do you think she's going to be very bad, miss?"

"I don't know; I can't tell. Hurry, Ellen, there's a good girl! get back as quickly as you can!"

A deep flush had overspread the face on the

pillow. The eyes yearned, and an agonised expression strengthened Mary's belief in the gravity of the seizure; she feared it to be the beginning of inflammation of the lungs. Three-quarters of an hour must be allowed for Kincaid to arrive, and, conscious that she could now do nothing but wait, the time lagged dreadfully. The silence, banished at the earlier pealing of the bell, had regained its dynasty, and once more a wide hush settled upon the house, indicated by the occasional clicking of a cinder on the fender. At intervals the sick woman uttered a tremulous sigh, and met Mary's gaze with a look of appeal, as if she recognised in her presence a kind of protective sympathy; but she had ceased to complain, and the watcher abstained from any active demonstration. In the globe beside the mirror the gas flared brightly, and this, coupled with the heat of the fire, filled the room with a moist radiance, against which the narrow line of dawn above the window-sill grew slowly more defined. The advent had been long expected, when sharp footfalls on the pavement smote Mary's ear, and, forgetting that Kincaid had his own key, she sprang up to let him in. The hall-door swung back, and she paused with her hand on the banisters. He came swiftly forward and passed her with a hurried salutation on the stairs.

There was, however, no anxiety visible on his face as he approached the bed. Merely a little genial concern was to be seen. His questions were put encouragingly; when a reply was given, he listened with an air of confidence confirmed.

"Am I very ill?" she gasped.

"You *feel* very ill, I dare say, dear; but don't go persuading yourself you *are*, or that'll be a real trouble!"

His fingers were on her pulse, and he was smiling as he spoke. Yet he knew that her life was in danger. The worthiest acting is done where there is no applause—it is the acting of a clever medical man in a sick-room.

Mary stood on the threshold watching him.

"Who put that funnel on the kettle?" he inquired, without turning. He had not appeared to notice it.

"I did," she answered. "Am I to take it off?"

"No."

He signed to her to go below, and after a few minutes followed her into the parlour.

"Give me a pen and ink, Miss Brettan, please."

"I've put them ready for you," she said.

He wrote hastily, and rose with the prescription held out.

"Where's Ellen?"

"Here, waiting to take it."

A trace of surprise escaped him. He said curtly:

"You're thoughtful. Was it you who put on that poultice?"

Her tone was as distant as his.

"We did all we could before you came; *I* put on the poultice. Did I do right?"

"Quite right. I asked because of the way it was put on."

With that expression of approval he left her and returned to his mother. Mary, unable to complete her toilette, not knowing from minute to minute when she might be called, occupied herself in righting the disorder of the room. She had thrown on a loosely-fitting morning dress of cashmere, one of the first things that she had made after she was installed here. An instant she had snatched to dip her face in water, but she had been able to do little to her hair, the coil of which still retained much of the scattered softness of the night, and after Ellen came back from the chemist's she sent her upstairs for some hairpins. She stood on the hearth, before the looking-glass, shaking the mass of hair about her shoulders, and then with uplifted arms winding it deftly on her head. The supple femininity of the attitude, so suggestive of recent rising,

harmonised with the earliness of the sunshine that tinged the parlour; and when Kincaid re-entered and found her so, he could not but be sensible of the impression, though he was indisposed to dwell upon it.

She looked round quickly:

"How is Mrs. Kincaid, doctor?"

"I'm very uneasy about her. I'm going back to the hospital now to arrange to stay here."

"What do you think has caused it?"

"I'm afraid she got damp and cold in the garden on Sunday."

"And it has gone to the lungs?"

"It has affected the left lung, yes."

She dropped the last hairpin, and as she stooped for it the swirl of the gown displayed a bare instep.

"I can help to nurse her, unless you'd rather send someone else?"

"You'll do very well, I think," he said; and he proceeded to give her some instructions.

She fulfilled these instructions with a capability he found astonishing. Before the day had worn through he perceived that, however her training had been acquired, he possessed in her a coadjutrix reliable and adroit. To herself, she was once more within her native province, but to him it was as if she had become suddenly voluble

in a foreign tongue. He had no inclination to meditate upon her skill—to meditate about her was the last thing that he desired now—but there were moments when her performance of some duty supplied fresh food for wonder notwithstanding, and he noted her dexterity with curious eyes. He had, though, refrained from any further praise. The gratitude that he might have spoken was checked by the aloofness of her manner; and, in the closer association consequent upon the illness, the formality that had sprung up between them suffered no decrease. Indeed it became permanent in this contact, which both would have shunned.

After the one scene in which she left the choice to him, she had afforded him no chance to resume their earlier relations had he wished it, and the studied politeness of her address was a persistent reminder that she directed herself to him in his medical capacity alone. She held the present conditions the least exacting attainable, since the distastefulness of renewed intercourse was not to be avoided altogether; but she in nowise exonerated him for imposing them, and she considered that by having done so he had made her a singularly ungracious return for the humiliation of her avowal. She sustained the note he

had struck; the key was in a degree congenial to her. But she resented while she concurred, and even more than to her judgment her acquiescence was attributable to her pride.

On the day following there were recurrences of pain, but on Wednesday this subsided, though the temperature remained high. Mary saw that his anxiety was, if anything, keener than it had been, and by degrees a latent admiration began to mingle with her bitterness. In the atmosphere of the sick-room the man and the woman were equally new to each other, and up to a certain point he was as great a surprise to her as was she to him. She saw him now professionally for the first time, and she recognised his resources, his despatch, with an appreciation quickened by experience. The visitor whom she had known lounging, loose-limbed and conversational, in an arm-chair had disappeared; the suppliant for a tenderness that she did not feel had become an authority whom she obeyed. Here, like this, the man was a power, and the change within him had its physical expression. His figure was braced, his movements had a resolution and a vigour that gave him another personality. He even awed her slightly. She thought that he must look more masterful to all the world in the

exercise of his profession, but she thought also that everyone in the world would approve the difference.

The confidence that he inspired in her was so strong that on Thursday, when he told her that he intended to have a consultation, she heard him with a shock.

"You think it advisable?"

"I fear the worst, Miss Brettan; I can't neglect any chance."

She had some violets in her hand—it was her custom to brighten the view from the bed as much as she could every morning—and suddenly their scent was very strong.

"The worst?"

"God grant my opinion's wrong!" he said. "Will you ask the girl to take the wire for me?"

It was to a physician in the county town he had decided to telegraph, one whose prestige was gradually widening, and whose reputation had been built on something trustier than a chance summons to the couch of a notability. Mary had heard the name before, and she strove to persuade herself that his view of the case might prove more promising. The day that had opened so gloomily, however, offered during the succeeding hours small food for faith. Towards noon the sufferer became abruptly restless, and the

united efforts of doctor and nurse were required to soothe her. She was fired by a passionate longing to get up, and pleaded piteously for permission. To "walk about a little while" was her one appeal, and the strenuousness of the entreaty was rendered more pathetic by her obvious belief that they refused because they failed to comprehend the violence of the desire. She endeavoured with failing energy to make it known, and—prevailed upon to desist at last—lay back with a look that was a lamentation of her helplessness. Later, she was slightly delirious and rambled in confused phrases of her son and her companion—his courtship and Mary's indifference. The man and the woman sat on either side of her, but their gaze no longer met. At the first reference to his attachment Mary had started painfully, but now by a strong effort her nervousness had been suppressed, and from time to time she moved to wipe the fevered lips and brow with a semblance of self-possession. As the daylight waned, the disjointed sentences grew rarer. Kincaid went down. Except for the deep breathing, silence fell again, until, as dusk gathered, the sudden words "I feel much better" were uttered in a tone of restored tranquility. Turning quickly, Mary saw that her ears had not deceived her. The assurance was

repeated with a feeble smile; the features had gained a touch of the cheerfulness that had been so remarkable in the voice. Soon afterwards the eyes closed in what appeared to be sleep.

Kincaid was striding to and fro in the parlour, his arms locked across his breast. As Mary ran in, his head was lifted sharply.

"She feels much better," she exclaimed; "she has fallen asleep!"

He stood there, without speaking—and she shrank back with a stifled cry.

"Oh! I didn't know. . . . Is it *that*?"

"Yes," he said, scarcely above a whisper. 'And she understood that what she had told him was the presage of death.

After this, both knew it to be but a matter of time. The arrival of the physician served merely to confirm despondence. He pronounced the case hopeless, and reluctantly accepted a fee to defray the expenses of the journey.

"I wish we could have met in happier circumstances," he said. . . . "You've the comfort of knowing that you did everything that could be done."

A page with a message of inquiry came up the steps as he left; such messages had been delivered daily. But on Saturday, when the baker's man brought the bread to Laburnum Lodge, he

found the blinds down; and within a few minutes of his handing the loaf to the weeping servant through the scullery window, the news circulated in Westport that Mrs. Kincaid had died unconscious at seven o'clock that morning.

While the baker's man derived this intelligence from the housemaid, Mary was behind the lowered blinds on the first floor, crying. She had just descended from her bedroom; seeing how deeply Kincaid was affected, she had retired there soon after the end. He had not shed tears, but that he was strongly moved was evident by the muscles of his mouth; and the quivering face of which she had had a glimpse kept recurring to her vividly.

He came in while she sat there. He was very pale, but now his face was under control again.

She rose, and advanced towards him irresolutely. "I'm so sorry! She was a very kind friend to me."

He put out his hand. For the first time since she had met him after posting the note, hers lay in it.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you, too, for all you did for her; I shall always remember it gratefully, Miss Brettan."

He seemed to be at the point of adding something, but checked himself. Presently he made

reference to the arrangements that must be seen to. That night he reoccupied his quarters in the hospital, and excepting in odd minutes, she did not see him again during the day. She found space, however, to mention that she purposed remaining until the funeral, and to this announcement he bowed, though he refrained from any inquiry as to her plans afterwards. "Plans," indeed, would have been a curious misnomer for the thoughts in her brain. The question that she had revolved earlier had been settled effectually by the death; now that all possibility of Mrs. Kincaid's recommending her had been removed, her plight admitted of nothing but conjecture.

In her solitude in the house of mourning, unbroken save for interruptions which emphasised the tragedy, or for some colloquy with the red-eyed servant, she passed her hours lethargic and weary. The week of suspense and insufficient rest had tired her out, and she no longer even sought to consider. Her mind drifted. A fancy that came to her was, that it would be delightful to be lying in a cornfield in hot sunshine, with a vault of blue above her. The picture was present more often than her thought of the impending horrors of London.

How much the week had held! what changes it had seen! She sat musing on this the next

evening, listening to the church bells, and remembering that a Sunday ago the dead woman had been beside her. Last Sunday there was still a prospect of Westport continuing to be her home for years. Last Sunday it was that, in the churchyard, she had confessed her past. Only a week—how full, how difficult to realise! She was half dozing when she heard the hall-door unlocked, and Kincaid greeted her as she roused herself.

“Did I disturb you? were you asleep?”

“No; I was thinking, that’s all.”

He sighed, and dropped into the opposite chair. She noted his harassed aspect, and pitied him. The Sunday previous she had not been sensible of any pity at all. She understood his loss of his mother; the loss of his faith had represented much less to her, its being a faith on which she personally had set small store.

“There’s plenty to think of!” he said wearily.

“You haven’t seen Ellen, doctor, have you? She has been asking for you.”

“Has she? what does she want?”

“She is anxious to know how long she’ll be kept. Her sister is in service somewhere and the family want a parlourmaid on the first of the month. I am sorry to bother you with trifles now, but she asked me to speak to you.”

"I must talk to her. Of course the house'll be sold off; there's no one to keep it on for. . . . How fagged you look! are you taking proper care of yourself again?"

"Oh yes; it is just the reaction, nothing but what'll soon pass."

"You didn't have the relief you ought to have had; you worked like two women."

He paused, and his gaze dwelt on her questioningly. She read the question with such clearness that, when he spoke, the words seemed but an echo of the pause.

"How did you know so much?" he asked.

"After I lost my father I was a nurse in the Yaughton Hospital for some years."

The answer was direct, but it was brief. Half a dozen queries sprang to his lips, and were in turn repressed. Her past was her own; he confined his inquiries to her future.

"And what do you mean to do now?"

"I'm going to London."

"Do you expect to meet with any difficulties in the way of taking up nursing again?"

"I think you know that there *were* difficulties in the way."

"I have no wish to force your confidence——" he said, with a note of inquiry in his voice.

"I haven't my certificate."

"You can refer to the Matron."

"I know I can; I will not. I told you two years ago there were persons I could refer to, but I wouldn't do it."

"May I ask why you should have any objection to referring to this one?"

She was silent.

"Won't you tell me?"

"I think you might understand," she said in a very low voice. "I went there after my father's death. I am not the woman who left the Yaughton Hospital."

His eyes fell, and he stared abstractedly at the grate. When he raised them he saw that hers had closed. He looked at her lingeringly till they opened.

"Now that *she* is gone," he exclaimed unsteadily, "your position is not so easy! Have you any prospect that you don't mention?"

She shook her head.

"Well, is there anything you can suggest?" he asked. "Any way out of the difficulty that occurs to you? Believe me——"

"No," she said, "I can see nothing that is practicable; I——"

"Would you be willing to come on the nursing-

staff here? We're short-handed in the night work. It is an opening, and it might lead to a permanent appointment."

Her heart began to beat rapidly; for an instant she did not reply.

"It is very considerate of you, very generous; but I am afraid that wouldn't do."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't do, because—well, I should have left Westport in any case."

"You meant to, I know. But between the way you'd have left Westport if my mother had lived, and the way you'd leave it now, there is a vast difference."

"I must leave it, all the same."

"Pardon me," he said, "I can't permit you to do so. I wouldn't let any woman go out into the world with the knowledge that she went to meet certain distress. Your hospital experience appears to solve the problem. You could come on next week. If your reluctance is attributable to myself—hear me out, I must speak plainly!—if you refuse because what has passed between us makes further conversation with me a pain to you, you've only to remember that conversation between us in the hospital will necessarily be of the briefest kind. All that *I* remember is that I've asked you to be my wife and you don't care

for me—I'm the man you've rejected. I wish to be something more serviceable, though; I wish to be your friend. In the hospital I shall have little chance, for there, to all intents and purposes, we shall be as much divided as if you went to London. While the chance does exist I want to use it; I want to advise you strongly to take the course I propose. It needn't prevent your attempting to find a post elsewhere, you know; on the contrary, it would facilitate your obtaining one."

Her hand had shaded her brow as she listened; now it sank slowly to her lap.

"I need hardly tell you I'm grateful," she said, in tones that struggled to be firm. "Anyone would be grateful; to me the offer is very—is more than good." Her composure broke down. "I know what I must seem to you—you have heard nothing but the worst of me!" she exclaimed.

"I would hear nothing that it hurt you to say," he answered; and for a minute neither of them said any more. There had been a gentleness in his last words that touched her keenly; the appeal in hers had gone home to him. Neither spoke, but the man's breath rose eagerly, and the woman's head drooped lower and lower on her breast.

"Let me!" she said at last in a whisper that his pulses leaped to meet. "It was there—when I was a nurse. He was a patient. Before he left, he asked me to marry him. When I went to him he told me he was married already. Till then there had been no hint, not the faintest suspicion—I went to him, with the knowledge of them all, to be his wife."

"Thank God!" said Kincaid in his throat.

"She was—she had been on the streets; he hadn't seen her for years. He prayed to me, implored me—— Oh, I'm trying to exonerate myself, I'm not trying to shift the sin on to him, but if the truest devotion of her life can plead for a woman, Heaven knows that plea was mine!"

"And at the end of the three years?"

"There was news of her death, and he married someone else."

She got up abruptly, and moved to the window, looking out behind the blind.

"I can't tell you how I feel for you," he said huskily. "I can't give you an idea how deeply, how earnestly I sympathise!"

"Don't say anything," she murmured; "you needn't try; I think I understand to-night—you proved your sympathy while my claim on it was least."

“And you’ll let me help you?”

The slender figure stood motionless; behind her the man was gripping the leather of his chair.

“If I may,” she said constrainedly, “if I can go there like—as you— Ah, if the past can all be buried and there needn’t be any reminder of what has been?”

“I’ll be everything you wish, everything you’d have me seem!”

He took a sudden step towards her. She turned, her eyes humid with tears, with thankfulness—with entreaty. He stopped short, drew back, and resumed his seat.

“Now, what is it you were saying about Ellen?” he asked shortly.

And perhaps it was the most eloquent avowal he had ever made her of his love.

CHAPTER XII

So it happened that Mary Brettan did not leave Westport the next week. And after a few months she was more than ever doubtful if she would leave it at all. The suggested vacancy on the permanent staff had occurred before then, and, once having accepted the post, there seemed to be no inducement to woo anxiety by resigning it.

At first the resumption of routine after years of indolence was irksome and exhausting. The six o'clock rising, the active duties commencing while she still felt tired, the absence of anything like privacy, excepting in the two hours allotted to each nurse for leisure—all these things fretted her. Even the relief that she derived from her escape into the open air was alloyed by the knowledge that outdoor exercise during one of the hours was compulsory. Then, too, it was inevitable that a costume worn once more should recall the emotions with which she had laid aside her last; inevitable that she should ask herself what the years had done for her since last she

stood within a hospital and bade it farewell with the belief she was never to enter one again. The failure of the interval was accentuated. Her heart had contracted when, directed to the strange apartment above the wards, she beheld the print dress provided for her use lying limp on a chair. An unutterable forlornness filled her soul as, proceeding to put it on, she surveyed her reflection in the narrow glass. Yet she grew accustomed to the change, and the more easily for its being a revival.

The speed with which the sense of novelty wore off indeed astonished her. Primarily dismaying, and a continuous burden upon which she condoled with herself every day, it was, next, as if she had lost it one night in her sleep. She had forgotten it until the lightness with which she was fulfilling the work struck her with swift surprise. Little by little a certain enjoyment was even felt. She contemplated some impending task with interest. She took her walk with zest in lieu of relief. She returned to the doors exhilarated instead of depressed. The bohemian, the lady-companion, had become a sick-nurse anew, and because the primary groove of life is the one which cuts the deepest lines, her existence rolled along the recovered rut with smoothness. The scenes between which it lay were not beauti-

ful, but they were familiar; the view it commanded was monotonous, but she no longer sought to travel.

Socially the conditions had been favoured by her introduction. The position that she had occupied in Laburnum Lodge gave her a factitious value, and gained her the friendliness of the Matron, a functionary who has the power to make the hospital-nurse distinctly uncomfortable, and who has on occasion been known to use it. It commended her also to the other nurses, two of whom were gentlewomen, inso-much as it promised an agreeable variety to conversation in the sitting-room. She was by no means unconscious of the extent of her debt to Kincaid, and her gratitude as time went on increased rather than diminished. Certainly the environment was conducive to a perception of his merits—more conducive even than had been the period of his medical attendance at the villa. The king is nowhere so attractive as at his court; the preacher nowhere so impressive as in the pulpit. Ashore the captain may bore us, but we all like to smoke our cigars with him on his ship. The poorest pretender assumes importance in the circle of his adherents, and poses with authority on some small platform, if it be only his mother's hearthrug. Here where the

doctor was the guiding spirit, and Mary found his praises on every tongue, the glow of gratitude was fanned by the breath of popularity. Had he deliberately planned a means of raising himself in her esteem, he could have devised none better than this of placing her in the miniature kingdom where he ruled. In remembering that he had wanted to marry her, she was sensible one day of a thrill of pride: nothing like regret, nothing like arrogance, but a momentary pride. She felt more dignity in the moment.

If he remembered it too, however, no word that he spoke evinced such recollection. The promise that he had made to her had been kept to the letter, and the past was never alluded to between them. As doctor and nurse their colloquies were brief and practical. It was the demeanour that he adopted towards her from the day of her instatement that added the first fuel to her thankfulness; and if, withal, she was inclined to review his generosity rather than to regard it, it was because he had established the desired relations on so firm a footing that she had ceased to believe that the pursuance of it cost him any pains. That she had held his love after the story of her shame she was aware; but that on reflection he could still want her for his wife she did not for an instant suppose; and she

often thought that by degrees his attitude had become the one most natural to him.

By what a denial of nature, by what rigid self-restraint, the idea had been conveyed, nobody but the man himself could have told. No one else knew the bitterness of the suffering that had been endured to give her that feeling of right to remain; what impulses had been curbed and crushed back, that no scruples or misgivings should cross her peace. The circumstances in which they met now helped him much, or he would have failed, despite his efforts; and to fail, he understood, would be to prove unworthy of her trust—it would be to see her go out from his life for ever. Still want her? So intensely, so devoutly did he want her, that, shadowed by sin as she was, she was holier to him than any other woman upon earth—fairer than any other gift at God's bestowal. He would have taken her to his heart with as profound a reverence as if no shame had ever touched her. If all the world had been cognizant of her disgrace, he would have triumphed to cry "My wife!" in the ears of all the world. A baser love might well have thirsted for her too, but it would have had its hours of hesitation. Kincaid's had none. No flood of passion blinded his higher judgment and urged him on; no qualms of convention inter-

vened and gave him pause. It was with his higher judgment that he prayed for her. His love burned steadily, clearly. The situation lacked only one essential for the ideal: the love of the penitent whom he longed to raise. The complement was missing. The fallen woman who had confessed her guilt, the man's devotion that had withstood the test—these were there. But the devotion was unreturned, the constancy was not desired. He could only wait, and try to hope; wondering if her tenderness would awaken in the end, wondering how he would learn it if it did.

To break his word by pleading again was a thing that he could do only in the belief that she would listen to him with happiness. If he misread her mind and spoke too soon, he not merely committed a wrong—he destroyed the slender link that there was between them, for he made it impossible for her to stay on. And yet, how to divine? how, without speaking, to ascertain? What could be gathered from the deep grey eyes, the serious face, the slim-robed figure, as he sometimes stood beside her, guarding his every look and schooling his voice? How could he tell if she cared for him unless he asked her? how could he ask her unless he had reasons to suppose that she did? The nature of their association

seemed to him to impose an insurmountable barrier between them; in freer parlance a ray of the truth might be discernible. When she had been here a year he determined to gain an opportunity to talk with her alone. He would talk, if not on matters nearest to him, at least on topics less formal than those to which their conversation was limited in the ward!

Such an opportunity, however, did not lie to his hand. It was difficult to compass without betraying himself, and, in view of the present difficulties, he appeared to have had so many advantages earlier that he marvelled at his having turned them to so little account. Their acquaintance at the villa during his mother's lifetime appeared to him, by comparison, to have afforded every facility that he was to-day denied, and he frequently recalled the period with passionate regret; he thought that he had never appreciated it at its worth, though, indeed, he had only failed to benefit by it. The villa now was tenanted by a lady with two children; and Mary often passed it, recalling the period also, albeit with a melancholy vaguer than his. One morning, as she went by, the door was open—the children were coming out—and she had a glimpse of the hall.

They came down the steps, carrying spades

and pails, bound for the beach, like herself. The elder of them might have been nine years old, and, belonging to the familiar house, they held a little sad interest for her. She wondered, as they preceded her along the pavement, in which of the rooms they slept, and if the different furniture had altered the aspect of it much. She thought she would like to speak to them when the sands were reached, and—— Then she saw Seaton Carew! Her heart jerked to her throat. Her gaze was riveted on him; she couldn't withdraw it. They were advancing towards each other; he was looking at her. She saw recognition flash across his features, and turned her head. The people to right and left swayed a little—and she had passed him. It had taken just fifteen seconds, but she could not remember what she had been thinking of when she saw him. The fifteen seconds had held for her more emotion than the last twelve months.

Her knees trembled. She supposed he must be at the theatre this week. But, when she saw a playbill outside the music-seller's, she was afraid to examine it lest he might be staring after her. She walked on excitedly. She was filled with a tremulous elation, which she cared neither to define nor to acknowledge. She reflected that she had left the hospital a few minutes earlier

than usual, and that otherwise she might have missed him. "Missed" was the word of her reflection. She wondered where he was staying—in which streets the professional lodgings were. She felt suddenly strange in the town not to know. She had been here three years, and she did not know—how odd! In turning a corner she saw another advertisement of the theatre, this time on a hoarding. The day was Monday, and the paper was still shiny with the bill-sticker's paste. She was screened from observation, and for a moment she paused, devouring the cast with a rapid glance. His wife's name didn't appear, so it wasn't their own company. She hurried on again. The sight of him had acted on her like a strong stimulant. Without knowing why, she was exhilarated. The air was sweeter, life was keener; she was athirst to reach the shore and, in her favourite spot, to yield herself up wholly to sensation.

And how little he had changed! He seemed scarcely to have changed at all. He looked just as he used to look, though he must have gone through much since the night they parted. Ah, how could she forget that parting—how allow the fires of it to wane? It was pitiful that, feeling things so intensely when they happened, one was unable to keep the intensity alive. The

waste! The puerility of loving or hating, of mourning or rejoicing so violently in life, when the passage of time, the interposition of irrelevant incident, would smear the passion that was all-absorbing into an experience that one called to mind!

She sank on to a bench upon the slope of ragged grass that merged into the shingles and the sand. The sea, vague and unruffled, lay like a sheet of oil, veiled in mist except for one bright patch on the horizon where it quivered luminously. She bent her eyes upon the sea, and saw the past. His voice struck her soul before she heard his footstep. "Mary!" he said, and she knew that he had followed her.

She did not speak, she did not move. The blood surged to her temples, and left her body cold. She struggled for self-command; for the ability to conceal her agitation; for the power she yearned to gather of blighting him with the scorn she craved to feel.

"Won't you speak to me?" he said. He came round to her side, and stood there, looking down at her. "Won't you speak?" he repeated—"a word?"

"I have nothing to say to you," she murmured. "I hoped I should never see you any more."

He waited awkwardly, kicking the soil with

the point of his boot, his gaze wandering from her over the ocean—from the ocean back to her.

"I have often thought about you," he said at last in a jerk. "Do you believe that?"

She kept silent, and then made as if to rise.

"Do you believe that I have thought about you?" he demanded quickly. "Answer me!"

"It is nothing to me whether you have thought or not. I dare say you have been ashamed when you remembered your disgrace—what of it?"

"Yes," he said, "I have been ashamed. You were always too good for me; I ought never to have had anything to do with a woman like you."

She had not risen; she was still in the position in which he had surprised her; and she was sensible now of a dull pain at the unexpectedness of his conclusion.

"Why have you followed me?" she said coldly. "What for?"

"What for? I didn't know you were in the town, I hadn't an idea—and I saw you suddenly. I wanted to speak to you."

"What is it you want to say?"

"Mary!"

"Yes; what do you want to say? I'm not your friend; I'm not your acquaintance: what have you got to speak to me about?"

"I meant," he stammered—"I wanted to ask you if it was possible that—that you could ever forgive the way I behaved to you."

"Is that all?" she asked in a hard voice.

"How you have altered! . . . Yes, I don't know that there's anything else."

She did not reply, and he regarded her irresolutely.

"Can you?"

"No," she said. "Why should I forgive you—because time has gone by? Is that any merit of yours? You treated me brutally, infamously. The most that a woman can do for a man I did for you; the worst that a man can do to a woman you did to me. You meet me accidentally and expect me to forgive? You must be a great deal less worldly-wise than you were three years ago."

She turned to him for the first time since he had joined her, and his eyes fell.

"I didn't expect," he said; "I only asked. So you're a nurse again, eh?"

"Yes."

He gave an impatient sigh, the sigh of a man who realises the discordancy of life and imperfectly resigns himself to it.

"We're both what we used to be, and we're both older. Well, I'm the worse off of the two, if that's any consolation to you. A woman's

always getting opportunities for new beginnings."

She checked the retort that sprang to her lips, eager to glean some knowledge of his affairs, though she could not bring herself to put a question; and after a moment she rejoined indifferently:

"You got the chance you were so anxious for. I understood your marriage was all that was necessary to take you to London."

"I was in London—didn't you hear?" He was startled into naturalness, the actor's naïve astonishment when he finds his movements are unknown to anyone. "We had a season at the Boudoir, and opened with *The Cast of the Die*. It was a frost; and then we put on a piece of Sargent's. That might have been worked into a success if there had been money enough left to run it at a loss for a few weeks, but there wasn't. The mistake was not to have opened with it, instead. And the capital was too small altogether for a London show; the exes were awful! It would have been better to have been satisfied with management in the provinces if one had known how things were going to turn out. Now it's the provinces under somebody else's management. I suppose you think I have been rightly served?"

"I don't see that you're any worse off than you used to be."

"Don't you? You've no interest to see. I'm a lot worse off, for I've a wife and child to keep."

"A child! You've a child?" she said.

"A boy. I don't grumble about that, though; I'm fond of the kid, although I dare say you think I can't be very fond of anyone. But—— Oh, I don't know why I tell you about it—what do you care!"

They were silent again. The sun, a disc in grey heavens, smeared the vapour with a shaft of pale rose, and on the water this was glorified and enriched, so that the stain on the horizon had turned a deep red. Nearer land, the sea, voluptuously still, and by comparison colourless, had yet some of the translucence of an opal, a thousand elusive subtleties of tint which gleamed between the streaks of darkness thrown upon its surface from the sky. A thin edge of foam unwound itself dreamily along the shore. A rowing-boat passed blackly across the crimsoned distance, gliding into the obscurity where sky and sea were one. To their right the shadowy form of a fishing-lugger loomed indistinctly through the mist. The languor of the scene had, in contemplation, something emotional in it, a quality that acted on the senses like music

from a violin. She was stirred with a mournful pleasure that he was here—a pleasure of which the melancholy was a part. The delight of union stole through her, more exquisite for incompleteness.

“It’s nothing to you whether I do badly or well,” he said gloomily. And the dissonance of the complaint jarred her back to common-sense. “Yet it isn’t long ago that we—good Lord! how women can forget; now it’s nothing to you!”

“Why should it be anything?” she exclaimed. “How can you dare to remind me of what we used to be? ‘Forget’?—yes, I have prayed to forget! To forget I was ever foolish enough to believe in you; to forget I was ever debased enough to like you. I wish I *could* forget it; it’s my punishment to remember. Not because I sinned—bad as it is, that’s less—but because I sinned for *you*! If all the world knew what I had done, nobody could despise me for it as I despise myself, or understand how I despise myself. The only person who should is you, for you know what sort of man I did it for!”

“I was carried away by a temptation—by ambition. You make me out as vile as if it had been all deliberately planned. After you had gone——”

“After I had gone you married your man-

ageress. If you had been in love with her, even, I could make excuses for you; but you weren't—you were in love only with yourself. You deserted a woman for money. Your 'temptation' was the meanest, the most contemptible thing a man ever yielded to. 'Ambition'? God knows I never stood between you and that. Your ambition was mine, as much mine as yours, something we halved between us. Has anybody else understood it and encouraged it so well? I longed for your success as fervently as you did; if it had come, I should have rejoiced as much as you. When you were disappointed, whom did you turn to for consolation? But I could only give you sympathy; and *she* could give you power. And everything of mine *had* been given; you had had it. That was the main point."

"Call me a villain and be done—or a man! Will reproaches help either of us now?"

"Don't deceive yourself—there are noble men in the world. I tell you now, because at the time I would say nothing that you could regard as an appeal. It only wanted that to complete my indignity—for me to plead to you to change your mind!"

"I wish to Heaven you had done anything rather than go, and that's the truth!"

"I don't; I am glad I went—glad, glad, glad!"

The most awful thing I can imagine is to have remained with you after I knew you for what you were. The most awful thing for you as well: knowing that I knew, the sight of me would have become a curse."

"One mistake," he muttered, "one injustice, and all the rest, all that came before, is blotted out; you refuse to remember the sweetest years of both our lives!"

She gazed slowly round at him with lifted head, and during a few seconds each looked in the other's face, and tried to read the history of the interval in it. Yes, he had altered, after all. The eyes were older. Something had gone from him, something of vivacity, of hope.

"Are you asking me to remember?" she said. "You seem to forget what the injustice was done for."

"Mary, if you knew how wretched I am!"

"Ah," she murmured half sadly, half wonderingly, "what an egotist you always are! You meet me again—after the way we parted—and you begin by talking about yourself!"

He made a gesture—dramatic because it expressed the feeling he desired to convey—and turned aside.

"May I question you?" he asked lamely the next minute. "Will you answer?"

"What is it that you care to hear?"

"Are you at the hospital?"

"Yes."

"For long? I mean, is it long since you came to Westport?"

"I have been here nearly all the time."

"And do—how—is it comfortable?"

"Oh," she said, with a movement that she was unable to repress, "let us keep to you, if we must talk at all. You'll find it easier."

"Why will you be so cruel?" he exclaimed. "It is you who are unjust now. If I'm awkward, it is because you're so curt. You have all the right on your side, and I have the weight of the past on me. You asked me why I spoke to you: if you had been less to me than you were—if I had thought about you less than I have—I shouldn't have spoken. You might understand the position is a very hard one for me; I am altogether at your mercy, and you show me none."

The hands in her lap trembled a little, and after a pause she said in a low voice:

"You expect more from me than is possible; I've suffered too much."

"My trouble has been worse. Ah! don't smile like that; it has been far worse! You've, anyhow, had the solace of knowing you've been ill-

used; *I've* felt all the time that my bed was of my own making and that I behaved like a black-guard. Whatever I have to put up with I deserve, I'm quite aware of it; but the knowledge makes it all the beastlier. My life isn't idyllic, Mary; if it weren't for the child—— Upon my soul, the only moments I get rid of my worries are when I'm playing with the child, or when I'm drunk!"

"Your marriage hasn't been happy?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"We don't fight; we don't throw the furniture at each other and have the landlady up, like—what was their name?—the Whittacombes. But we don't find the days too short to say all we've got to tell each other, she and I; and—— Oh, you can't think what a dreadful thing it is to be in front of a woman all day long that you haven't got anything to say to—it's awful! And she can't act and she doesn't get engagements, and it makes her peevish. She might get shopped along with me for small parts—in fact, she did once or twice—but that doesn't satisfy her; she wants to go on playing lead, and now that the money's gone she can't. She thinks I mismanaged the damned money and advised her badly. She hadn't been doing anything for a year till the spring, and then she went out with Laura

Henderson to New York. Poor enough terms they are for America! But she's been grumbling so much that I believe she'd go on as an Extra now, rather than nothing, so long as I wasn't playing lead to another woman in the same crowd."

She traced an imaginary pattern with her finger on the seat. He was still standing, and suddenly his face lighted up.

"There's Archie!" he said.

"Archie?"

"The boy."

A child of two years, in charge of a servant-girl, was at the gate of one of the cottages behind them.

"You take him about with you?"

"He was left with some people in town; I've just had him down, that's all. We finish on Saturday, and there's the sea; I thought two or three weeks of it would do him good. Will you—may he come over to you?"

He held out his arms, and the child, released from the servant's clasp, toddled smilingly across the grass, a plump little body in pelisse and cape. The gaitered legs covered the ground slowly, and she watched his child running towards him for what seemed a long time before Carew caught him up.

"This is Archie," he said diffidently; "this is he."

"Oh," she said, in constrained tones, "this is he?"

The man stood him on the bench, with a pretence of carelessness that was ill done, and righted his hat quickly, as if afraid that the action was ridiculous. The sight of him in this association had something infinitely strange to her—something that sharpened the sense of separation, and made the past appear intensely old and ended.

"Put him down," she said; "he isn't comfortable."

"Do you think he looks strong?"

"Yes, of course, very. Why?"

"I've wondered—I thought you'd know more about it than I do. Is Archie a good boy?"

"Yes," answered the child. "Mamma!"

"Don't talk nonsense—mamma's over there!" He pointed to the sea. "He talks very well, for his age, as a rule; now he's stupid."

"Oh, let him be," she said, looking at the baby-face with deep eyes; "he's shy, that's all."

"Mamma!" repeated the mite insistently, and laid a hand on her long cloak.

"The thumb's wrong," she murmured after a

pause in which the man and woman were both embarrassed; "see, it isn't in!"

She drew the tiny glove off, and put it on once more, taking the fragile fingers in her own, and parting with them slowly. A feeling complex and wonderful crept into her heart at the voice of Tony's child; a feeling of half-reluctant tenderness, coupled with an aching jealousy of the woman that had borne one to him.

They made a group to which any glance would have reverted—the old-young man, who was obviously the father, the baby, and the thoughtful woman, whose costume proclaimed her to be a nurse. The costume, indeed, was not without its influence on Carew. It reminded him of the days of his first acquaintance with her—days since which they had been together, and separated, and drifted into different channels. Having essayed matrimony as a means to an end, and proved it a cul-de-sac, he blamed the woman with whom he had blundered very ardently, and would have been gratified to descant on his mistake to the other one, who was more than ever attractive because she had ceased to belong to him. The length of veil falling below her waist had, to his fancy, a cloistral suggestion which imparted to his allusions to their

intimacy an additional fascination; and Archie's presence had seldom occupied his attention so little. Yet he was fonder of this offshoot of himself than he had been of her even in the period that the dress recalled; and it was because she dimly understood the fact that the child touched her so nearly. Like almost every man in whom the cravings of ambition have survived the hope of their fulfilment, he dwelt a great deal on the future of his son; longed to see his boy achieve the success which he had come to realise would never be attained by himself, and lost in the interest of fatherhood some of the poignancy of failure. The desire to talk to her of these and many other things was strong in him, but she roused herself from reverie and said good-bye, as if on impulse, just as he was meaning to speak.

"I shall see you again?"

"I think not."

Then he would have asked if they parted in peace, but her leave-taking was too abrupt even for him to frame the inquiry.

CHAPTER XIII

It surprised him, and left him vaguely disappointed. To break off their interview thus sharply seemed to him motiveless. He could see no reason for it, and his gaze followed her receding figure with speculative regret. When she was out of sight he picked the child up, and, carrying him into the cottage parlour, sat down beside the open window, smoking, and thinking of her.

It was a small room, poorly furnished, and, fretted by its limitations, the child became speedily fractious. A slipshod landlady pottered around, setting forth the crockery for dinner, while the little servant, despatched with the boy from town, mashed his dinner into an unappetising compound on a plate. From time to time she turned to soothe him with some of the loud-voiced facetiæ peculiar to the little servant species in its dealings with fretful childhood, and at these moments Carew suspended his meditations on his quondam mistress to wish for the presence of his wife. It was only the second day of his son's visit to him, and his unfamiliarity

with the arrangement was not without its effect upon his nerves.

Always dissatisfied with the present time, his capacity for enjoying the past was correspondingly keen. Reflectively consuming a chop, in full view of the unappetising compound and infancy's vagaries with a spoon, he proceeded to re-live it, discerning in the process a thousand charms to which the reality had seen him blind.

He was unable to shake off the influence of the meeting when dinner was done. Fancifully, while the child scrambled in a corner with some toys, he installed Mary in the room; imagining his condition if he had married her, and moodily watching the curls of tobacco smoke as they sailed across the dirty dishes. "Damn it!" he exclaimed, rising. But for the conviction that it would be futile, he would have gone out to search for her.

That he would see her again before he left the place he was determined. But he failed to do so both on the morrow and the next day, though he extended his promenade beyond its usual limits. He did not, in these excursions, fail to remark that a town sufficiently large to divide one hopelessly from the face one seeks, can yet be so small that the same strangers' countenances are recurrent at nearly every turn. A coloured gentle-

man he anathematised especially for his iteration.

Though he doubted the possibility of the thing, he could not rid himself of the idea that she would be at the theatre some evening, impelled by the temptation to look upon him without his knowledge; and he played his best now on the chance that she might be there. As often as was practicable, he scanned the house during the progress of the piece, and between the acts inspected it through the peep-hole in the curtain.

Noting his observations one night, a pretty girl in the wings asked jocularly if "*she* had promised to wait outside for him."

"No, Kitty, my darling, she hasn't; she won't have anything to do with me!" he answered, and would have liked to stop and flirt with her. His brain was hot at the instant, and one woman or another just then——

If Mary had been waiting, he could have talked to her as sentimentally as before; and have felt as much sentiment, too. All compunction for his lapses he could assuage by a general condemnation of masculine nature.

The pretty girl had no part in the play; she was the daughter of a good-looking woman who was engaged in the dual capacity of "chambermaid" and wardrobe-mistress; but although she had only just left boarding-school, it was a fore-

gone conclusion that, like her mother, she would be connected with the lower branches of the profession before long. Already she had acquired very perfectly, in private, the burlesque lady's tone of address, and was familiar with the interior of provincial bars, where her mother took a "tonic" after the performance.

Carew ran across them both, among a group of the male members of the company, in the back-parlour of a public-house an hour later. Kitty, innocent enough yet to find "darling" a novelty, welcomed him with a flash of her eyes; but he made no response, and, gulping his whisky, sat glum. The others commented on his abstraction. He replied morosely, and called for "the same again." It was not unusual for him to drink to excess now—he was accustomed to excuse the weakness by compassionating himself upon his dreary life—and to-night he lay back on the settee sipping whisky till he grew garrulous.

They remained at the table long after the closing hour, the landlady, who was a friend of Kitty's mamma, enjoining them to quietude. She was not averse from joining the party herself when the lights in the window had been extinguished; nor did Kitty decline to take a glass of wine when Carew at last pressed her to be sociable.

"Because you're growing up," he said with a foolish laugh—" 'getting a big girl now'!"

She swept him a mock obeisance in the centre of the floor, shaking back the hair that was still worn loose about her shoulders.

"Sherry," she said, "if mother says her popsy may? Because I'm 'getting a big girl now,' mother!"

The bar was in darkness, and this necessitated investigation with a box of matches. When the bottle was produced, it proved to be empty; the girl's pantomime of despair was received with loud guffaws. Everybody had drunk more than was advisable, and the proprietress again attempted to restrain the hilarity by feeble allusions to her licence.

"The sherry's in the cupboard down the passage," she exclaimed; "won't you have something else instead? Now, do make less noise, there's good boys; you'll get me into trouble!"

"I'll go and get it," said Kitty, breaking into a momentary step-dance, with uplifted arms. "Trust me with the key?"

"And I'll go and see she doesn't rob you," cried Carew. "Come along, Kit!"

"No you won't," said her mother; "she'll do best alone!" But the remonstrance was unheeded, and, as the girl ran out into the passage,

he followed; and, as they reached the cupboard and stood fumbling at the lock, he caught her round the waist and kissed her.

They came back with the bottle together, in the girl's bearing an assertion of complacent womanhood evoked by the indignity. Carew applied himself to the liquor with renewed diligence; and by the time the party dispersed circumspectly through the private door, his eyes were glazed.

The sleeping town stretched before his uncertain footsteps blanched in moonlight as he bade the others a thick "good-night." His apartments were a mile, and more, distant, and, muddled by drink, he struck into the wrong road, pursuing and branching from it impetuously, till Westport wound about him in the confusion of a maze. Once he halted, in the thought that he heard someone approaching. But the sound receded; and feeling dizzy every minute, he wandered on again, ultimately with no effort to divine his situation. The sun was rising when, partially sobered, he passed through the cottage-gate; the sea lapped the sand gently under a flushing sky. But in the bedroom a candle still burned, and it was in the flare of the candle that the little servant confronted him with a frightened face.

"Master Archie, sir!" she faltered; "I've been up with him all night—he's ill!"

"Ill?" He stood stupidly on the threshold. "What do you mean by ill? What is it?"

"I don't know; I don't know what I ought to do; I think he ought to have a doctor."

He pushed past her, with a muttered ejaculation, to the bed where the child lay whimpering.

"What's the matter, Archie? What is it, little chap?"

"It's his neck he complains of," she said; "you can see, it's all swollen. He can't eat anything."

Carew looked at it dismayed. A sudden fear of losing the child, a sudden terror of his own incompetence seized him.

"Fetch a doctor," he stammered, "bring him back with you. You should have gone before; it wasn't necessary to wait for me to come in to tell you that if the child was taken ill, he needed a doctor! Go on, girl, hurry! You'll find one somewhere in the damned place. Wait a minute, ask the landlady—wake her up and ask which the nearest doctor is! Tell him he must come at once. If he won't, ring up another—a delay may make all the difference. Good God! why did I have him down here?"

The waiting threatened to be endless. A basin of water was on the washhand-stand, and he

plunged his head into it. The stir of awakening life was heard in the quietude. Through the window came the clatter of feet in a neighbouring yard, the rattle of a pail on stone. He contemplated the child, conscience-stricken by his own condition, and strove to allay his anxiety by repeated questions, to which he obtained peevish and unsatisfactory replies.

It was more than two hours before the girl returned. She was accompanied by a medical man who seemed resentful. Carew watched his examination breathlessly.

"Is it serious?"

"It looks like diphtheria; it's early yet to say. He's got a first-rate constitution; that's one thing. Mother a good physique? . . . So I should have thought! Are you a resident?"

"I'm an actor; I'm in an engagement here; my wife's abroad. Why do you ask?"

"The child had better be removed—there's danger of infection with diphtheria; lodgings won't do. Take him to the hospital, and have him properly looked after. It'll be best for him in every way."

"I'm much obliged for your advice," said Carew. But the idea was intimidating. "I shall be here, myself, for another week at least," he

added, in allusion to the fee. "Is it safe to move him, do you think?"

"Oh yes, no need to fear that. Wrap him up, and take him away in a fly this morning. The sooner the better. . . . That's all right. Good-day."

He departed briskly, with an appetite for breakfast.

"Archie will have a nice drive," said Carew in a tone of dreary encouragement—"a nice drive in a carriage with papa."

"I'm sleepy," said the child.

"A nice drive in the sunshine, and see the sea. Nursie will put on your clothes."

"I don't want!"

His efforts to resist strengthened Carew's dislike to the proposed arrangement. It was not in the first few minutes that this abrupt presentment of the hospital recalled to the man's mind Mary's connection with it; and when the connection flashed upon him his spirits lightened. If the boy *had* to be laid up, away from his mother's relatives in London, the mischance could hardly occur under happier conditions than where—— The reflection faded to a question-point. *Would* she be of use? Could he expect, or dare to ask for tenderness from Mary Brettan

—and to the other woman's child? He doubted it.

In the revulsion of feeling that followed that leaping hope, he almost determined to withhold the request. Many children were safe in a hospital; why not his own child? He would pay for everything. And then the thought of Archie forsaken among strangers made him tremble; and the little form seemed to him, in its lassitude, to have become smaller still, more fragile.

Again and again, in the jolting cab, he debated an appeal to Mary, wrestling with shame for the sake of his boy. Without knowing what she could do, he was sensible that her interest would be of value. He clung passionately to the idea of leaving the hospital with the knowledge that it contained a friend, an individual who would spare to the child something more than the patient's purchased and impartial due.

The cab stopped with a jerk, and he carried him into the empty waiting-room. It was a gaunt, narrow apartment on the ground-floor, with an expanse of glass, like the window of a shop, overlooking the street. He put him in a corner of one of the forms against the walls, and, pending the appearance of the house-surgeon, murmured encouragement. The min-

utes lagged. It occurred to him that the ailment might be pronounced trivial, but the hope deserted him almost as it came, banished by the surroundings. The bare melancholy of the walls chilled him anew, and the suggestion of poverty about the place intensified his misgivings. He thought he would speak to her. If she refused, it would have done no harm. And she would not refuse, she was too good. Yes, she had always been a good woman. He remembered——

The door-knob turned, and he rose in the presence of Kincaid. The eyes of the two men met questioningly.

“Your child?” said Kincaid, advancing.

“Yes; it’s his neck. I was advised to bring him here, because I’m only in lodgings. I’d like——”

“Let me see!”

Carew resumed his seat. His gaze hung on the doctor’s movements; every detail twanged his nerves. A nurse was called in to take the temperature. He watched her with suspense, and smiled feebly at the child across her arm.

“Diphtheritic throat. We’ll put him to bed at once. Take him away, nurse—put him into a special ward.”

“I should like——” said Carew huskily; “I know one of the nurses here. Might I see her?”

"Yes, certainly. Which one?"

"Her name is 'Brettan—Mary Brettan.'"
He stooped to pat the tearful face, and missed Kincaid's surprise. "If I might see her now——?"

"Ask if Nurse Brettan can come down, please! Say she is wanted in the waiting-room."

A brief pause ensued. The closing of the door left them alone. The father's imagination pursued the figures that had disappeared; Kincaid's was busy with the fact of the man's being an acquaintance of Mary's—the only acquaintance that had crossed his path. Surprise suggested his opening remark:

"You're a visitor here, you say? Your little son's sickness has come at an unfortunate time for you."

"It has—yes, very. I'm at the theatre—and my apartments are none too good."

He mentioned the address; the doctor made some formal inquiries. Carew asked how often he would be permitted to see the boy; and when this was arranged, silence fell again.

It was broken in a few seconds. The sound of a footstep on the stairs was caught by them simultaneously. Simultaneously both men looked round. The footsteps were succeeded by the faint rustle of a skirt, and Nurse Brettan

crossed the threshold. She started visibly—controlled herself, and acknowledged Carew's greeting by a slight bow.

Kincaid, in a manner, presented him to her—courteously, constrainedly.

"This gentleman has been waiting to see you. I'll wish you good-morning, sir."

Mary moved to the window, and stood there without speaking. In the print and linen costume of the house she recalled with increased force to Carew the time when he had seen her first.

"Archie has got diphtheria," he said; "he's just been taken upstairs."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Why have you asked for me?"

"They told me I couldn't keep him at home—that I must bring him here. . . . Mary, you will do what you can for him?"

She raised her head calmly.

"He is sure of careful nursing," she answered; "no patient is neglected."

"I know. I know all that. I thought that you——"

"I'm not in the children's ward," she said; "there isn't anything *I* can do."

He looked at her dumbly. Mere indifference his agitation would have found vent in com-

bating, but the conclusiveness of the reply left him nothing to urge.

"I must be satisfied without you, then," he said at last. "I thought of you directly."

"He'll have every attention; you needn't doubt that."

"Such a little chap—among strangers!"

"We have very young children in the wards."

"And perhaps to be dangerously ill!"

"You must try to hope for the best."

"Ah, you speak like the hospital nurse to me!" he cried; "I was remembering the woman."

"I speak as what I am," she returned coldly; "I *am* one of the nurses. I have no remembrances, myself."

"You could remember this week, when we met again. And once you wouldn't have found it so impossible to spare a minute's kindness to my boy!"

She moved towards the door, paler, but self-contained.

"I must go now," she said; "I can't stay away long."

"You choose to forget only when something is asked of you!"

"I have told you," she said, turning, "that it is out of my power to do anything."

"And you are glad you can say it!"

"Perhaps. No reminder of my old disgrace is pleasant to me."

"Your reformation is very complete," he answered bitterly; "the woman I used to know would have been unable to retaliate upon a helpless child."

The sting of the retort roused her to refutation. Her hand, extended towards the door, dropped to her side; she faced him swiftly.

"You find me what you made me," she said with white lips. "I neither retaliate nor pity. What is your wife's child to me, that you ask me to care for it? If I'm hard, it was you who taught me to be hard before he was born."

"It's *my* child I asked you to care for. And I brought myself to ask it because he's my dearest thing on earth. I thank God to learn he won't be in your charge!"

She shivered, and for a moment looked at him intently. Then her eyelids drooped, and she left him without a word.

She went out into the corridor—her hand was pressed against her breast. But her duties were not immediately resumed. She made her way into the children's wing, moving with nothing of indecision in her manner, but like one who pro-

ceeds to fulfil a purpose. The two rows of beds left a passage down the floor, and she scanned the faces till she reached the nurses' table.

By chance, she spoke to the nurse that Kincaid had summoned.

"There's a boy just been brought in with diphtheria, Sophie; do you know where he is?"

"Yes, I'm going back to him in a minute. He's in a special ward."

"Let me see him!"

"Have you got permission?"

"No."

Nurse Gay hesitated.

"I shall get into trouble," she said. "Why don't you ask for it?"

"I don't want to wait; I want to see him now."

"I've been in hot water once this week already——"

"Sophie, I know the mite, and—and his people. I *must* go in to him!"

The girl glanced at her keenly.

"Oh, if it's like that!" she said. "It's only a wiggling—go!" And she told her where he was.

He lay alone in the simple room, when Mary entered—a diminutive patient for whom the narrow cot looked large. The nurse had been showing him a picture-book, and this yawned loosely on the quilt, where it had slid from his

listless hold. At the sound of Mary's approach, he turned. But he did not recognise her. A doubtful gaze appraised her intentions.

At first she did not speak. She stooped over the pillow, smoothing and re-smoothing it mechanically, a hand trembling closer to the disordered curls. Her own gaze deepened and hung upon him; her lips parted. Her hands crept timidly nearer. Her face was bent till her mouth was yielding kisses on his cheek. She yearned over him through wet lashes, a wondering smile always on her face.

"Archie," she murmured; "Archie, baby-boy, is it comfy for you? Won't you see the pictures—all the pretty people in the book?"

"Not nice pictures," he complained.

"You shall have nicer ones this afternoon," she said; "this afternoon, when I go out. Let me show you these now! Look, here's a little boy in bed, like you! His name was 'Archie,' too; and one day his papa took him to a big house, where papa had friends, and——"

"Papa! I *want* papa!"

"Oh, my darling," she said, "papa is coming! He'll come very, very soon. The other little boy wanted papa as well, and he wasn't happy at first at all. But in the big house everybody was so kind, and glad to have Archie there, that

presently he thought it a treat to stop. It was so nice directly that it was better than being at home. They gave him toys, lots and lots of toys; and there were oranges and puddings—it was beautiful!”

She could not remain, she was needed elsewhere; and when Kincaid made his round she was on duty. But she ascertained developments throughout the day, and by twilight she knew that the child was grievously ill. She did not marvel at her interest; it engrossed her to the exclusion of astonishment. If she was surprised at all, it was that Carew could have believed in her neutrality. Yet she was thankful that he had believed in it; and at the same time, rejoiced that his first impulse had been to put faith in her good heart. She did not analyse her sympathy, ashamed of the cause from which it sprang. When she had gazed, during the intervening years, at the faded photograph, she had reproached herself and wept; now it all seemed natural. She sought neither to reason nor to euphemise. The feeling was spontaneous, and she went with it. She called it by no wrong word, because she called it nothing. She was borne as it carried her, blindly, unresistingly, without pausing to name it or to define its source. It seemed natural. She inquired about Archie

when she had risen next morning, and a little later, contrived another flying visit to the room. But he was now too ill to notice her.

In the afternoon, Carew came again. She learnt it while he was there, and gathered something of his wretchedness. She heard how he besieged the nurse with questions: "Had she seen so bad a case before—well, often before? Had those who recovered been so young as Archie? Was there nothing else that could be tried?" She listened, with her head bowed, imagining the scene that she could not enter; deploring, remembering, re-living—praying for "Tony's child."

Not till the man had gone, however, was everything related to her. She was sitting at the extremity of the ward, sewing, shortly to be free for the night. It was the hour when the quiet of the hospital deepened into the hush that precluded the extinction of the patients' lights. The supper-trays had long since been removed from the bedsides. Through the apertures of curtain, a few patients, loath to waive the privilege while they held it, were to be seen reading books and magazines; others were asleep already, and even the late-birds of the ward who dissipated in wheel-chairs, to the envy of the rest, had made their final excursion for the day. The Major

had stopped his chair to utter his last wish for "a comfortable night, sir." The chess champion had concluded his conquest on a recumbent adversary's quilt. Where breakfast comes at six o'clock, grown men resume some of the customs of their infancy, and the day that begins so early closes soon. It was very peaceful, very still; and she was sitting in the lamp-rays, sewing.

She looked round as the Matron joined her. It was known that the case interested her, and in subdued tones they spoke of it.

"How is he?"

"He's been dreadfully bad. The worst took place before the father left; Dr. Kincaid had to come up."

"What?—tell me!"

"He had to perform tracheotomy. The father was there all the time; Dr. Kincaid told him what was going to be done, but he wouldn't go. The child was blue in the face and there wasn't any stopping to argue. When the cut in the throat was made and the tube put in, I thought the man was going to faint. He was standing just by me. 'Good God! Is this an experiment?' he said. I told him it was the only way for the child to breathe, but he didn't seem to hear me. And when the fit of coughing came

—oh, my goodness! You know what the coughing's like?"

"Go on!"

"He made sure it was all over; he burst out sobbing, and the doctor ordered him out out the room. 'If you're fond of your child, keep quiet here, sir,' he said, 'or go and compose yourself outside!' I think he was sorry he'd spoken so sternly afterwards, though he was quite right, for——"

"Oh!" shuddered Mary. "Did you see him again?"

"Yes; I told him he'd had no business to stop. He said, 'If the worst happens, I shall think it right I was there.' I said he must try to believe that only the best would happen now; though whether I ought to have said it I don't know. When it comes to tracheotomy in diphtheria, the child's chance is slim. Still, this one's as fine a little chap as ever I saw; he's got the strength of many a pair we get here—and the man was in such a state. He's coming back to-night—he's to see *me*, anyhow; he had to hurry off to the theatre to act. I can't imagine how he'll get through."

"I must go! I must go to the ward!" She rose, clasping her hands convulsively. "I can,

can't I? It's Nurse Mainwaring's time to relieve me—why isn't she here?"

The Matron calmed her.

"Hush! you can go as soon as she comes. Don't take on like that, or I shall be sorry I told you. Nurse Bradley has complained of feeling ill—I expect that's what it is."

Mary raised a faint smile, deprecating her vehemence.

"I'm very fond of the boy," she said, with apology in her voice. "It was very kind of you to tell me; I thank you very much."

Nurse Mainwaring appeared now.

"Nurse Bradley can't get up, madam," she announced.

"Nonsense! what is it?"

"A sick-headache; she can't see out of her eyes."

It was the moment of dismay in which a hospital realises that its staff, too, is flesh and blood—the hitch in the human machinery.

"Then we're short-handed to-night. You relieve here, Nurse Mainwaring?"

"Yes, madam."

"And Nurse Gay—who should relieve her?"

"Nurse Bradley."

"*I'll* relieve her," cried Mary; "I'd like to!"

"You need your night's rest as much as most.

And there's no napping with trachy—it means watching all the time.”

“I shan't nap; I shan't want to. Somebody must lose her night's rest—why not I?”

“I think we can manage without you.”

“It'll be a favour to me—I'm thankful for the chance.”

“Well, then, you shall halve it with someone. You can take the first half, and——”

“No, no,” she urged, “that's rough on the other and not enough for me. Give it me all!”

The Matron yielded:

“Nurse Brettan relieves Nurse Gay!”

In the room the boy lay motionless as if already dead. From the mouth breath no longer passed; only by holding a hand before the orifice of the tube inserted in the throat could one detect that he now breathed at all. As Mary took the seat by his side, the force of professional training was immediately manifest. She had begged for the extra work with almost feverish excitement; she entered upon it collected and self-controlled. A stranger would have said: “A conscientious woman, but experience has blunted her sensibilities.”

On the table were some feathers. With these, from time to time throughout the night, she had to keep the tube free from obstruction. Even

the briefest indulgence to drowsiness was impossible. Unwavering attention to the state of the passage that admitted air to the lungs was not merely important, the necessity was vital. A continuous, an inflexible vigilance was required. It was to this that the nurse, already worn by the usual duties of the day, had pledged herself in place of the absentee.

At half-past nine she had cleansed the tube twice. At ten o'clock Kincaid came in.

"I am relieving Nurse Gay," she said, rising; "Nurse Bradley's head is very bad."

He went to the bed and ascertained that all was well.

"It'll be very trying for you; wasn't there anyone to divide the work?"

"I wanted to do it all myself."

"Ah, yes, I understand; you know the father."

It was the only reference that he had made to the father's asking for her, and she was sensible of inquiry in his tone. She nodded. And, alone together for the first time since her appointment, they stood looking at Carew's child.

She had no wish to speak. On him the situation imposed restraint. But to be with her thus had a charm, for all that. It was not to be uttered, not to be dwelt on; but, due in part to the prevailing silence of the house, there was an

illusion of confidential intercourse that he had not felt with her here before.

While they looked, the boy gave a quick gasp. The tube had become clogged.

She started and threw out her hand towards the feathers. But Kincaid had picked one up already, favoured by his position.

"All right!" he said; "I'll free it."

He leant over the pillow, feather in hand. She watched him with eyes widening in terror, for she saw that his endeavours were futile and he could not free it.

The waxen placidity of the upturned face vanished as she watched. It regained the signs of life to struggle with the gripe of death—distorted in an instant, and distorted frightfully. The average woman would have wept aloud. The nurse, to all intents and purposes, preserved her calmness still.

It was Kincaid who gave the first token of despondence.

"The thing's blocked!" he exclaimed; "I can't clear it."

His voice had the repressed despair of a surgeon, who is an enthusiast, too, opposed by a higher force. Under the test of his defeat her composure broke down. Confronted by a danger in which her interest was vivid and personal she

—as the father had done before her—became agitated and unstrung.

“You must,” she said. “Doctor, for Heaven’s sake!”

He was trying still, but with scant success.

“I’m doing my best; it seems no good.”

“You must save this life,” she repeated. “You will?”

“I tell you I can’t do any more.”

“You will—you shall!” she persisted wildly. The very passion of motherhood suffused her features. “Doctor, it is *his* child!”

He looked at her—their gaze met, even then. It was only in a flash. Abruptly the gasps of the dying baby became horrible to witness. The eyeballs rolled hideously, and seemed as if they would spring from their sockets. The tiny chest heaved and fell in agonising efforts to gain air, while in its convulsive battle against suffocation the frail body almost lifted itself from the mattress.

“Go away,” said the man; “there’s nothing you can do.”

She refused to stir. She appealed to him frantically.

“Help him!” she stammered.

“There’s no way.”

“You, the doctor, tell me there’s no way?”

"None."

"But *I* know there *is* a way," she cried; "I can suck that tube!"

"Mary! My God! it might kill you!"

She flung forward, but the conflict ceased as he pulled her back. A small quantity of the mucus had been dislodged by the paroxysm that it had produced. Nature had done—imperfectly, but still done—what science had failed to effect. The boy breathed.

The outbreak was followed by complete exhaustion, and again it seemed that life was extinct. Kincaid assured himself that it lingered still, and turned to her gravely.

"You were about to do a wicked, and a foolish thing. After what it has gone through, nothing under Heaven can save the child; you ought to know as much as that. At best you could only hope to prolong life for two or three hours."

Tears were dripping down her cheeks.

"'Only!'" she said; "do you think that's nothing to me? An hour longer, and his father will be here—to find him living, or dead. Do you suppose I can't imagine—do you suppose I can't feel—what *he* feels, there on the stage, counting the seconds to release? In an hour the curtain'll be down and he'll have rushed here

praying to be in time. If it were revealed that I should do nothing but prolong the life by sacrificing my own, I'd sacrifice it! Gladly, proudly—yes, proudly, as God hears! You could never have prevented me—nothing should prevent me. I'd risk my life ten times rather than he should arrive too late."

"This," drearily murmured the man who loved her, "is the return you would make for his sin?"

"No," she said; "it is the atonement I would offer for mine."

He stood dumbly at the head of the cot; the woman trembled at the foot. But they saw the change next minute simultaneously. Once more the passage had become hopelessly clogged. With a broken cry, she rushed to the cot's vacant side. This time he could not pull her back. He spoke.

"Stop! Nurse Brettan, I order you to leave the ward!"

The voice was imperative, and an instant she wavered; but it was the merest instant. The woman had vanquished the nurse, and the woman was the stronger now. A glance she threw of mingled supplication and defiance, and, casting herself on the bed, she set her lips to the tube.

CHAPTER XIV

IT was the work of a moment. Almost as he started forward to restrain her, she had raised herself, and, burying her face in a handkerchief, leant, shaking, against the wall.

Kincaid gazed at her, white and stern, and a tense silence followed, broken by her.

“You can have me dismissed,” she said—“he will see his child!”

He answered nothing. The cruelty of the speech which ignored and perverted everything outside the interests of the man by whom she had been wronged seemed the last blow that his pain could have to bear. A sense of the inequality and injustice of life’s distribution overwhelmed him. Viewed in the light of her defeated enemy, he felt as broken, as far from power or dignity, as if the imputation had been just.

She resumed her seat; and, waiting as long as duty still required, he at last made some remark. She replied constrainedly. The intervention of the pause was demonstrated by their

tones, which sounded flat and dull. He was thankful when he could go; and his departure was not less welcome to the woman. To her reactionary weakness the removal of supervision came as balm. He went from her heavily, and she drew her chair yet closer to the bedside.

Tony would see his boy! She had no other settled thought, excepting the reluctant one that she would meet him when he came. The reflection that he would hear of her share in the matter gladdened her scarcely at all; indeed, when she contemplated his enlightenment, she was perturbed. He would learn that his initial faith in her had been justified, and he would be sorry, piteously sorry, for all the hard words that he had used. But by *her* there was little to be gained; what she had done had been for him. She found it even a humiliation that her act would be known to him—a humiliation which his gratitude would do nothing to decrease. She looked at the watch that she had pawned for the rent of her garret after his renunciation of her, and determined the length of time before he could arrive.

The stress of the last few minutes could not be suffered to beget any abatement of wariness. But by degrees, as the reverberation of the outburst faded, she felt more tranquil than she had

done since the Matron joined her earlier in the evening; and the vigil was continued with undiminishing care. Archie would die, but now Tony would be present. The closing moments would not pass while he was simulating misery or mirth on a stage. Horror of the averted fate, more dreadful to a woman's mind even than to the father's own, made the brief protraction appear an almost priceless boon.

It was possible for him to be here already; not likely, perhaps, so soon as this, but possible, supposing that the piece "played quick" and that a cab had been ordered to await him at the door. She listened for the roll of wheels in the distance, but the silence was undisturbed. Archie was lying as calm as when she had entered. If no further impediment occurred, to exhaust the remaining strength more speedily, it seemed safe to think that he might last two hours.

Her misgivings as to her risk were slight. The danger she had run might prove fatal; but the thing had been done with impunity at least once before—she remembered hearing of it. While we have our health, the contingency of sickness appears to us more remote from ourselves than from our neighbours; in her own case, a serious result looked exceedingly improbable. She regarded the benefit of her temerity as

cheaply bought. None knew better than she, however, how much complete attention was called for, what alertness of eye and hand was essential afterwards; and, sitting there, her gaze was fastened on the boy as if she sought to hearken to every flutter of his pulse.

Now a cab did approach; she held her breath as it rattled near. It stopped, she fancied, before the hospital gate. Still with her stare riveted on the unconscious child, she strained her ears for the confirmatory tread. The seconds ticked away, swelling to minutes, but no footstep fell. The hope had been a false one! Presently the cab was heard again, driving away. She began to be distressed, alarmed. Making allowance for a too sanguine calculation, it was time that he was here! . . . The delay was unaccountable; no conjecture could be formed as to its extent. Her fingers were laced and unlaced in her lap nervously. She imagined the rumble of wheels in the sighing of the wind, alternately intent and discomfited. The faint slamming of a cottage-door startled her to expectation. In the profundity of the hush that spread with every subsidence of sound, she seemed to hear the throbbing of her heart.

Out in the town a clock struck twelve, and apprehension verged upon despair. The eyes

fixed on the boy were desperate now; she leant over him to contest the advent of the end shade by shade. So far no change was shown; Tony's fast dwindling chance was not yet lost. "God, God! Send him quick!" she prayed. Racked with impatience, tortured by the fear that what she had done might, after all, be unavailing, she strove to devise some theory to uphold her. Debarred from venting her suspense in action, she found the constraint of her posture almost physical pain.

The clock boomed the hour of one. It swept suddenly across her mind that the Matron had been doubtful of letting him proceed to the ward on his return: he must have come and gone! She had been reaching forward, and her arm remained extended vaguely. Consternation engulfed her. If during ten seconds she thought of anything but her neglect to ensure his being admitted, she thought she felt the blood in her freezing from head to foot. He had come and gone!—she was thwarted by her own oversight. Defeat paralysed the woman. . . . Her exploit now assumed an aspect of grievous hazard, enhanced by its futility. She lifted herself faint at soul. Her services were instinctive, mechanical; she resumed them, she was assiduous and watchful; but she appeared to be prompted by

some external influence, with her brain benumbed.

All at once a new thought thrilled her stupor. She heard the stroke of three, and the boy was still alive! The ungovernable hope shook her back to sensation. She told herself that the hope was wild, fantastic, that she would be mad to harbour it, but excitement shivered in her; she was strung with the intensity of what she hesitated to own. Every second that might bring the end and yet withheld it, fanned the hope feebly; the passage of each slow, dragging minute stretched suspense more taut. She dreaded the quiver of her lashes that veiled his face from view, as if the spark of life might vanish as her eyelids fell. Between eternities the distant clock rang forth the quarters of the hour across the sleeping town, and at every quarter she gasped "Thank God!" and wondered would she thank Him by the next. Hour trailed into hour. The boy lingered still. Haggard, she tended and she watched. The dreariness of day-break paled the blind before the bed. The blind grew more transparent, and hope trembled on. There was the stir of morning, movement in the street; dawn touched them wanly, and hope held her yet. And sunrise showed him breathing peacefully once more—and then she knew that

Heaven had worked a miracle and the child would live.

Among the staff that case is cited now and still the nurses tell how Mary Brettan saved his life. The local *Examiner* gave the matter a third of a column, headed "Heroism of a Hospital Nurse." And, cut down to five lines, it was mentioned in the London papers. Mr. Collins, of Patten-den's, glanced at the item, having despatched the youth of the prodigious yawn with a halfpenny, and—remembering how the surname was familiar—wondered for a moment what the woman was doing who could never sell their books.

It was later in the morning that Carew entered the hospital, as Kincaid crossed the hall. The porter heard the doctor's answers to a stammered question:

"Your child is out of danger. I'm sorry to say Nurse Brettan risked her life for him."

Then the visitor started, and stopped short hysterically, and the doctor moved by, with his jaw set hard.

To Mary he had said little. He was confronted by a recovery that it had been impossible to foresee, but his predominant emotion was terror of its cost. From the Matron she heard of Carew's gratitude, and received his message

of entreaty to be allowed to see her. It was not delivered, however, till she woke, and then he had gone; and by the morrow her reluctance to have an interview had deepened. She contented herself with the note that he sent: one written to say that he "could not write—that in a letter he was unable to find words." She read it very slowly, and it drooped to her lap, and she sat gazing at the wall. She brushed the mist from her eyes, and read the lines again, and yet again—long after she knew them all by heart.

Next day she rose with a strange stiffness in her throat. With her descent to the ward, it increased. And she was frightened. But at first she would not mention it, because she was loath for Kincaid to know. She felt it awkward to draw breath; by noon the difficulty was not to be concealed. She went to bed—protesting, but by Kincaid's command.

Nurse Brettan had become a patient. She said how queer it was to be in the familiar room in this unfamiliar way. The nurse whose watch of Archie she had relieved was chosen to attend on her; and Mary chaffed her weakly on her task.

"It ought to be a good patient this spell, Sophie! If I'm a nuisance, you may shake me."

But to Kincaid she spoke more earnestly now the danger-signal was displayed.

"You did all you could to stop me, doctor. Whatever happens, you'll remember that! You did everything that was right, and so did I."

"Don't talk rubbish about 'happenings,' nurse!" he said; "we shall want you to be up and at work again directly."

Nevertheless, she grew worse as the child grew stronger; and for a fortnight the man who loved her suffered fiercer pain each time he answered "Rubbish!" And the man whom she loved sought daily tidings of her when he called to view the progress of his boy. She used to hear of his inquiries and turn her face on the pillow, and lie for a long while very quiet. Her distaste to meeting him had gone and she craved for him to come to her. But now she could not bring herself to let him do it, because her neck and face were so swollen and unsightly, and her voice had dwindled to a whisper that was not nice to hear.

Then all hope was at an end—it was known that she was dying. And one morning the nurse said to her:

"Perhaps this afternoon you'd like to see him? He has asked again."

"This afternoon?" Momentarily her eyes brightened, but the shame of her unloveliness came back to her, and she sighed. "Give me . . . the glass, Sophie . . . there's a dear!" She looked up at her reflection in the narrow mirror held aslant over the bed. "No," she said feebly, "not this afternoon. Perhaps to-morrow."

The girl put back the glass without speaking. And a gaze followed her questioningly till she left.

When Kincaid came in, Mary asked him how long she had to live.

He was worn with a night of agony—a night whose marks the staff had observed and wondered at.

"How long?" she asked; "I know I can't get better. When's it going to be?" He clenched his teeth to curb the twitching of his mouth. "It isn't *now*?"

"No, no," he said. "You shouldn't, you *mustn't* frighten yourself like this!"

"To-day?"

"Not to-day," he answered hoarsely, "I honestly believe."

"To-morrow?"

"Mary!"

"To-morrow?" she pleaded in the same pain-

ful whisper. "Tell me the truth. What to-morrow?"

"I think—to-morrow you may know how much I loved you."

She did not move; and he had turned aside. He noticed it was raining and how the drops spattered on the window-sill.

"I didn't see," she murmured; "I thought—you—had—forgotten."

"No," he said; "you never saw. It doesn't matter; I know now it would never have been any use. Hush, dear; don't talk; it's so bad for you!"

"I'm sorry. But I was *his* before you came. I couldn't. Could I?"

"No, of course. Don't worry; don't, for God's sake! There's nothing to be sorry about. I must go to the next ward; I shall see you this afternoon. Try to sleep a little, won't you?"

He went out, with a word to the nurse, who came back; and Mary lay silent.

Presently she said:

"Sophie—yes, this afternoon."

Something in the voice startled; the girl gulped before she spoke:

"All right! he shall hear as soon as he comes."

"Don't forget."

"I won't forget, chummy; you can feel quite sure about it."

"Thanks, Sophie. I'm so tired."

The rain was falling still. She heard it blowing against the panes, and lay listening to it, wondering if it would keep him away. Then her thoughts drifted; and she slept.

When Kincaid returned he took Sophie's place, and sat watching till the figure stirred. The eyes opened at him vaguely.

"I've been asleep?"

"Yes."

"Is it very late?"

"It's about three, I think. . . . Just three."

"Ah!" she said with relief.

She closed her eyes again, and there was a long pause. He covered her nerveless hand with his own.

"Don't grieve," she whispered; "it doesn't hurt."

"Oh, my dear, my dear! You, and my mother, too—helpless with both!"

"The many," she said faintly, "think of the many you've pulled through. You've . . . been very good to me . . . very good."

To his despair it seemed that ever since they met she had been telling him that. It was the dole that she had yielded, the atom that his

devotion had ever wrung from her—she found him “good”!

And even as she said it, her eagerness caught the footfall that she had been waiting for; and she nestled lower on the pillow, trying to hide her disfigurement from view.

“Mary,” said Kincaid, “you didn’t care for me; but will you let me kiss you on the forehead—while you know?”

A smile—a smile of tenderness wonderfully new and strange to him irradiated her face; and, turning, he saw the other man had come in.



